

Daniel Vawter

HIST 133

Professor Marcuse

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### **Alfred von Tirpitz's Opinions on the Naval Arms Race**

Although *Erinnerungen* roughly translated to 'memoirs' in English, by 1970 the once renowned book had been translated into 4 separate languages. Being the autobiography of Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen* is a first-hand account of the German navy's figurehead's grievances and quarrels. Following the defeat in World War 1, harsh restrictions were placed on the German government that hampered the nation's rapid industrialization to a slow, less menacing pace.

Germany was told to pay heavy reparations to the war victors, leaving the once proud country in a state of remorse as it had yet to find an outlet to place the blame for the humiliating loss.

Although modern historians have offered countless arguments on who was at fault, a majority of primary sources scrutinize both the expansion of the German navy and von Tirpitz himself.

Being named 'Imperial Admiral' of the German fleet in 1897 Tirpitz's stake in the navy's reputation was considerable. Throughout the many chapters of his memoir, he argues the importance of the navy concerning nationalism and deterring unwanted violence. In his eyes the navy's original purpose was to act as a "peacekeeper", preventing Britain from any "attack(s) on German trade".<sup>1</sup> Although this Weltpolitik (or global politic) mindset was meant to promote a safe means of economic and cultural expansion, its underlying anti-détente doctrine unintentionally created a political frenzy in which Britain would slowly increase sanctions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 97.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 98.

At the time of Tirpitz's inauguration at the helm, Germany was undergoing a pivotal economic enlightenment. The Franco-Prussian war in the 1870s had just concluded with the unification of a German empire that built upon Prussia's already strong military tradition. Though Britain was the undisputed world hegemon in the 19th century, the emergence of the newly formed mainland power both frightened and agitated them. With haste, their parliament implemented the "two-keep standard" amongst other policies to ensure an unchecked militaristic dominance in the North Sea.<sup>3</sup> Though these responses were of interest to the Germans, members of the high command like Tirpitz were more consumed with establishing a prestigious reputation within the newly entered global theater. Moreover, they wanted to promote the new German empire as one of economic fortitude in the face of an ever-existent oppressor.

Growing up in a conservative household Tirpitz was a staunch believer in the military's importance in foreign affairs; in times of war and peace. His original post as a midshipman gunner painted a pretty picture of how backward the German navy was. He would spend his days wielding a medieval halberd while praying that his ship wouldn't run across one of the several naval mines that seemed to always drift off course.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the technologically advanced British were enjoying the privileges of being a world power such as unhitched engines and tethered chains.<sup>5</sup> In Tirpitz's eyes if the Germans were able to improve their military's capabilities the British would become hesitant in any acts of belittlement.

The most notable improvements to the German navy could be seen in the various naval legislations passed in 1898, 1900, 1906, 1908, and 1912. These reforms were supposed to represent the heart of the German people as Kaiser Wilhelm fully embraced the ideals of renaissance. In turn, the navy acted as a personification of the German state while directly aiding

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 207

<sup>4</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 11

in the expansion of the colonial sphere of influence in places like Africa and the Pacific. In terms of roots, the German navy was desperately trying to leverage itself to make up for lost time seeing as most of Europe had allied itself against the newly-fledged empire by the onset of the 20th century. Call it what you will; Germany was in an unfavorable political position and it thought creating an intimidating force was the most viable way to deter competition and aid in the resource scrambles that defined colonialism. Although not everyone agreed with these measures, the unstructured cabinet carried out each legislative bill with some being more aggressive than others.

During the European “Scramble for Africa,” both the French and British dominated the territories along the Mediterranean. One of the ‘hot-bed’ provinces in this region was Morocco, a country going through political changes at the end of the 19th century. Though many Germans thought this to be a good opportunity for outward projection, the French had beaten them to it; mobilizing a force in Northern Africa. In a bid to prevent the French from controlling the country’s resources, rogue German officers parked one of the brand-new boats right off the Moroccan coast.<sup>6</sup> This event, known as the Agadir Crisis of 1911, became a major talking point; escalating tensions in the already primed Europe. Universally no one was happy with the incident, as many of the Germans blamed bureaucratic disorganization while the British were quick to rally behind public protests and anti-German sentiments. The subsequent ‘Mansion Speech’ in Britain even caused a minor case of mass hysteria which Tirpitz would later interpret as jingoistic motives. To say Tirpitz was rubbed the wrong way about the entire situation would be an understatement as his lack of real power was culminating in the destruction of his life work’s reputation. As historical critic Christian Gauss put it Tirpitz’s influence seems to “have

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<sup>6</sup> Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920, pp. 95.

been virtually nil”.<sup>7</sup> It was a slow and grueling process that he watched his Germany fall out of favor with the scornful Britain who arguably wanted to hinder Germany’s growth from conception. Nonetheless, by 1911 it was evident that Britain would side with France in any political conflicts with Germany, creating a force radically superior to anything the Germans could produce in the upcoming years.

Although the German toy which was the navy did its part in constructing a patriotic image, its usage provoked an already uneasy Britain into siding with a rival. This is why several historians and historical figures have blamed the construction of the German fleet for the rising tensions of World War 1; even going as far as to call it a ‘naval arms race’. While these sentiments were held by German and non-Germans alike, naval patrons like Tirpitz were charismatic in their arguments that misapplication and poor communication within the Reichstag were to blame for the decay of political relations with vying powers. Regardless; Tirpitz’s memoir showcases an innate German desire for a mascot during its emergence on the global stage. While his arguments can (and have) be dismantled, he makes it clear that any instances of prewar belligerency were not ordered by his navy; a force which was designed to project power and deter any economic and physical aggression.

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<sup>7</sup> Gauss, Christian. *The American Historical Review* 25, no. 3 (1920): 499–500. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1836893>.

## Exploration Timeline: Anglo-German Naval Arms Race

### Quick Overview Narrative

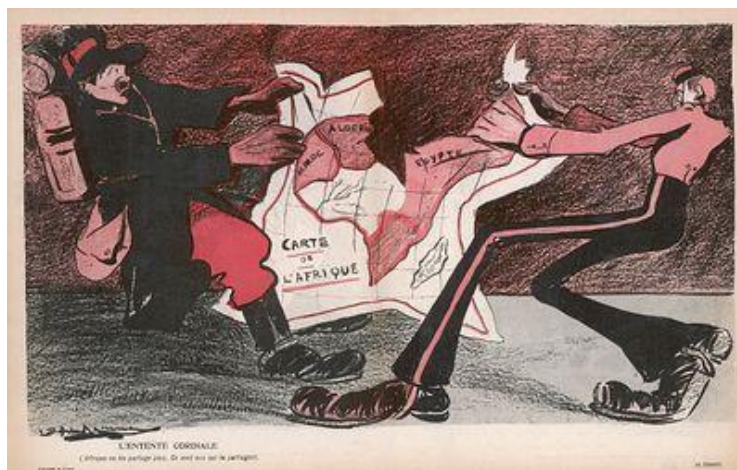
- Foundation of German Navy 1898
- British Naval Expansions 1889
- German Naval Expansion 1900
- \*German Public Displays (Regatta Week) 1904
- \*Britain's Arthur Lee Speech 1905
- First Moroccan Crisis 1905
- Britain's Launching of HMS Dreadnought 1906
- \*German Naval Expansion 1906 + 1908
- \*Second Moroccan Crisis (Agadir) 1911
- \*Britain's Mansion Speech 1911
- \*German Naval Expansion 1912
- Outbreak of WWI 1914

\*' events mentioned in primary source

Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*. Hase & Koehler, Leipzig 1919



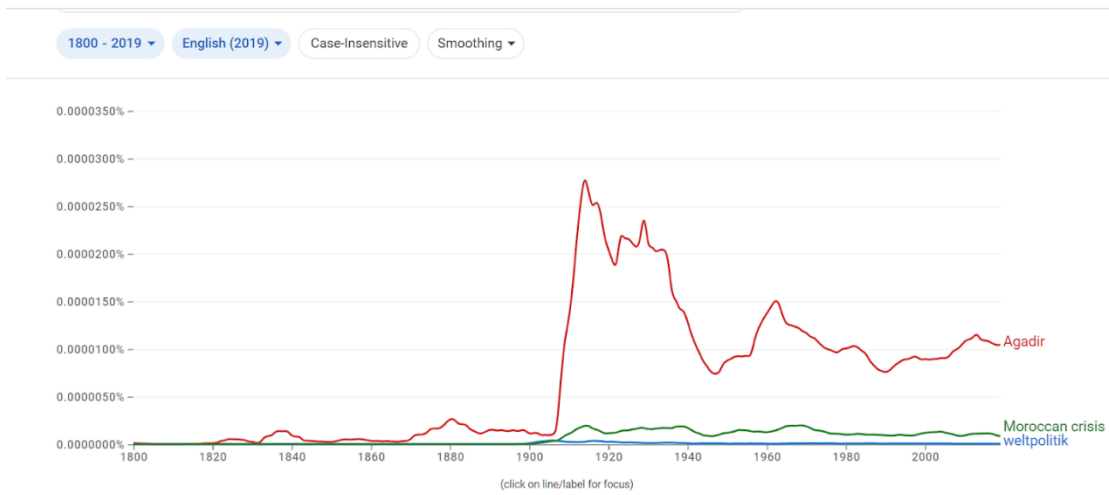
[https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_image.cfm?image\\_id=1386](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1386) (6)



<https://www.wsj.com/articles/europes-scramble-for-africa-1502320150> (7)



<https://www.historytoday.com/archive/signposts-new-directions-britains-empire-story> (8)



^Google's Ngram Viewer Depicting the Usage of 'Agadir' (9)



^Google's Ngram Viewer Depicting the Usage of 'Tirpitz' (10)

## Annotated Bibliography:

“The Agadir Crisis. - Germany’s Demands. Sudden and Delicate Situation.  
*the Advertiser* (Adelaide, SA: 1889 - 1931) - 21 Jul 1911.” *Trove*, The Advertiser, 21 July 1911, [trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5297718](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5297718).

### Relevance:

A British newspaper published in the wake of the Agadir Crisis. Though the source hasn’t been utilized in many publications it is meant to give a general overview regarding the incident while unintentionally painting Germany as an ever-hungry belligerent. Refers to the stale-mate as a ‘deadlock’ as neither side was willing to give concessions right away. The source overall sets the tone for the rising tensions and gives way to an inherent British mediation that strengthened the Entente Cordiale and eventually led to the later political sanctions on the German power.

Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen [Recollections]*. Leipzig, 1920.

### Relevance:

The autobiography penned by Germany’s Imperial Admiral sheds light on the disagreements within the German state both during and in the events leading to the Great War. Although the book hasn’t been used as a reference a lot with respect to later criticisms of Tirpitz’s character, it paints a clear picture of a German perspective following the unification in 1871. In other words, the memoir defends the navy’s intentions and somewhat points the blame for rising tensions on policymakers, poor organization, and British sensitivity as a whole.

Gauss, Christian. *The American Historical Review* 25, no. 3 (1920): 499–500.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/1836893>.

### Relevance:

After a stint in Prussia Christian Gauss returned to America to become a critic turned Dean at Princeton University. It was there that he penned multiple works for the *American Historical Review* such as his opinion on Alfred von Tirpitz’s autobiography, *Erinnerungen*. Although this interpretation was short it quickly ran through the conflicting opinions of the German high command. After stating that Tirpitz acted with ‘arrogance’ and ‘petulance’, he goes on to acknowledge that Tirpitz didn’t have any real power within the German cabinet. Instead, his voice was used as a ‘figurehead’ for the construction of the controversial German fleet. While Gauss viewed Tirpitz’s recollections as a ‘childish’ defense of his actions, his constant irritation with German politicians helped shed light on the disorganization of the high command.

Jaraus, Konrad H. “The Illusion of Limited War: Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg Calculated Risk, July 1914 [reprint- 1969].” *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung. Supplement*, no. 24 (2012): 53–79.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41637868>.

### Relevance:

Being a US-based German historian Jaraus has published numerous works about both World Wars. In this piece, he discusses the former chancellor Bethman Hollweg’s positions leading to the war. Today Hollweg is known for blaming a lot of pre-war tensions on the arms race. Although this was an important factor, Hollweg was pivotal in his passing of the military legislation. Then again, newly discovered primary sources have placed Hollweg’s true

jurisdiction into question as the German parliament was still in its infancy. While the responsible party for the political blunders leading the war are still in question, Jarausch brings to light the incoherence of the high command.

Jarausch, Konrad H. "Revising German History: Bethmann Hollweg Revisited." *Central European History* 21, no. 3 (1988): 224–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546122>.

Relevance:

In this revisitation of the aforementioned article, Jarausch dives into the unwillingness of the British to part ways with their French companions. While this was of utmost concern for the hindered German state, Hollweg endorsed the idea that the German emergence in the global market was well worth the risks of upsetting the hegemonic incumbent. In turn, this places Hollweg's policies in line with Tirpitz's remarks about an unorganized government that was willing to pass the blame onto a more entrenched position.

Mauer, John H. "Averting the Great War". *Naval War College Review* vol. 67, no. 3-4 (2014): 1-20. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1291&context=nwc-review>

Relevance:

John Mauer is an esteemed professor of naval warfare and foreign policy. Two focuses that perfectly embody the conundrum seen during the events leading to the Great War. Mauer's argument brings up Winston Churchill's position during the inception of the foreign feud. Unlike his counterparts, Churchill didn't buy into the disarmament fad that was sweeping through Britain. Although this didn't hurt the progressions following the disputes in Morocco, it appears that there was no ill will in the events leading to the acts of aggression. This backs the remarks made by Tirpitz and promotes the idea that a peaceful arms race could've been achievable.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-German\\_naval\\_arms\\_race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-German_naval_arms_race)

Relevance:

The Wikipedia page about the Anglo-German arms race gives a clear picture of what bills were passed and where they were placed chronologically. Cross-referencing this information to the primary sources illustrates how each bill was the result of a foreign action, whether it be the creation of the dreadnought class, the establishment of new naval codes, or an increase in foreign entanglement.

Note on Cartoons #6-8

Attached are some political cartoons that represent the influencers of the arms race. More specifically the existence of a militaristic culture in Germany and the unmatched expansionist efforts of rival European nations such as France and Britain. All three of these illustrations were published in the 19th century and visually depict the thought process of Tirpitz and Germans alike.

Note on nGram #9-10



The attached nGrams show the prevalence of the words Tirpitz, Agadir, Moroccan Crisis, and Weltpolitik. Unfortunately, the title of Tirpitz's memoir has become distorted in the computer's algorithm thanks to the existence of multiple other popular books that hold the same title. The same can be said about his name as the Tirpitz destroyer (boat) completely distorted the prevalence of the name in the years during and after World War II. Luckily success was found with the phrase Agadir which became an extremely popular term following the crisis in 1911. This goes to show that the event was heavily used as a 'false flag' for its rallying efforts against the German state. This is especially true when considering the ongoing 'Moroccan Crisis' never gained the same momentum according to the software.