

## 2020: What problems were caused by the naval policy of Wilhelm II?

The naval policy of Wilhelm II saw a rise in Anglo-German tensions and shifts in European diplomacy, eventually culminating in the First World War. Otto von Bismarck had attempted to maintain the balance of powers, however this was overturned by Wilhelm II's power of Weltpolitik. Wilhelm's expansion of Germany Navy policy and diplomatic blunders contributed heavily to these issues, as will be discussed in this essay.

Up until his resignation in 1891, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had used his policy of Realpolitik to maintain a delicate system of alliances. This was to maintain the balance of power between European states, primarily keeping France in isolation. During this period, Britain was in a state of 'splendid isolation'. Maintaining peace through various alliances with Austria-Hungary, Italy and Russia, Bismarck hoped for Britain to remain in this position. Above all else, he wanted to prevent the possibility of a two-front war with France, Britain or Russia. Bismarck was careful to avoid antagonistic colonial policy, organising the Second Congress of Berlin 1885-86 to control the 'scramble for Africa'. In this way, Anglo-German tensions remained relatively low before Wilhelm's reign, and European diplomacy remained stable.

However, this state of relations and Britain's 'splendid isolation' would end when Kaiser Wilhelm II ascended the throne in 1888. Aged just 28, he was determined to be more active than his grandfather Wilhelm I. He believed in Weltpolitik, aimed at making Germany a world power. He wanted to expand the Germany Navy, and lacked diplomatic skill. Closely related to Queen Victoria, he thought this personal relationship would maintain peaceful relations. This mistake and his expansionary naval policy led to Anglo-German tensions. Before his 1891 resignation, Bismarck described the Kaiser as a 'balloon', in reference to his rashness and misunderstanding of diplomacy that led to these problems.

This naval policy began to drive Anglo-German tensions. At the time, Britain maintained a 'two-power principle', in which their navy had to be twice as strong as the next two navies combined. Admiral von

Tirpitz, of the German Navy, proposed a 'Risk Theory', in which the German Navy did not have to be as strong as the British Navy, but strong enough to dissuade an attack. There was also severe public pressure for navy expansion from groups such as the German Navy League, which had 1.1 million members by 1914.

These issues continued with the introduction of the Navy Laws by Wilhelm II. These laws allowed for the expansion of the German Navy, and Iron Budgets to raise taxes to fund this navy. As a country with very little access to the ocean other than the North Sea, Britain did not see a reason for Germany's expansion in comparison to Britain's need for an 'essentially defensive' navy (Churchill), as an island. However, Britain and other European powers were not extremely concerned at first, until the Navy Laws were passed at regular intervals in 1898, 1900, 1902, 1906, 1908 and 1912.

This expansion of naval policy created the naval race between Britain and Germany, heightening the tensions that would lead to the outbreak of war. In 1904, British Admiral John Fisher invented the Dreadnought- a large, powerful military warship. In 1907, the German Navy acquired some Dreadnoughts, Germany then began to expand the Kiel Canal from 1907-1914 to allow these ships to pass through. This highly alarmed Britain and France, who entered into a secret agreement where Britain would defend the Channel and North Sea and France the Mediterranean, should Germany attack. Admiral von Tirpitz refused to compromise with the British, despite the German Foreign Secretary's growing concern of a two front war.

One of the most important consequences of this rise in tensions was the shift in European diplomacy, altering the balance of powers created by Bismarck. In 1890, Wilhelm had allowed the Reinsurance Treaty to lapse, believing his personal friendship with Tsar Nicholas would prevent conflict. Alarmed at this new lack of allies, Russia entered into the Franco-Russian alliance of 1895, marking the first time France had left isolation since the 1874 Franco-Prussian war. In 1902, Britain entered into the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, in which Japan would protect British interests in the Pacific if Britain respected Japan's right to influence in Korea. The rising tension with Germany further led Britain to enter into two agreements, which created Germany's first possibility of a two front war. Both agreements ended colonial rivalries: the 1904 Anglo-French Entente and the 1907 Anglo-Russian Entente. By 1907, Europe was now divided into two camps: the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy;

and the Triple Entente of Britain, France and Russia. This shift in the diplomatic landscape was directly related to Wilhelm II's naval policy and would set the stage for WWI.

A key example of the problems posed by this naval policy was the First Moroccan Crisis of 1904-05. Up to this point, it had been agreed by European powers that Morocco would remain independent. However, Wilhelm suspected France was attempting to extend its influence and as such visited Morocco to promise the Sultan he would ensure Moroccan independence. He demanded an international conference in Algeiras, Spain to test the strength of the Anglo-French Entente. Britain agreed to the Conference, despite French opposition. However, at the Conference only Austria-Hungary and Morocco backed Germany with Russia, Britain, Italy and the US siding with France. This showed the weakness of Italy as an ally in the Triple Alliance and only strengthened the Entente. Spain and France were given control over Morocco's borders and police with Germany gaining a small part of the French Congo as compensation, leading to Wilhelm's humiliation.

These tensions and problems continued to grow under the naval policy of Wilhelm II. This growing unease and shift in European diplomacy culminated in the 'Blank Cheque' to Austria-Hungary, following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The European structures of alliances formed during this period led to the war expanding to encompass all powers, a huge cost of human life and Wilhelm's eventual abdication in 1918.

In summary, Wilhelm II's naval policy directly contributed to problems of Anglo-German tensions and European diplomacy which contributed to WWI. Though Bismarck had maintained a delicate balance of power, the expansionary naval policy of Wilhelm II eroded this delicate web. This rise in tensions changed the European landscape, and international relations, dramatically.