HOW DID THE ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL RIVALRY EMERGE AND LED TO THE GREAT WAR?

I Introduction

Anglo-German naval race is an interesting issue to explore, not only because two of the great European powers were involved, but this rivalry had a tremendous impact on the world order and to a great extent was responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. Explicitly, the German Navy had appeared late in the history of Europe. Before the century turned, the Kaiser and his ministers became convinced that the German greatness needed an adequate sea power as well. As a result, the traditional German reliance on infantry and artillery was being replaced with an ambitious programme to create a Navy League. So Britain began to shift. Splendid isolation was reviewed and new arrangements were made to face the German threat. Given this, in the context of Anglo-German naval competition, this paper will attempt to explain the series of events which caused hostility between these two powers and ultimately, their final decision to go to war in 1914.

Naval rivalry laid behind the German-English antagonism which had increased steadily in the last decade of the 19th Century. “Considerable evidence suggests that 1871 was indeed the pivotal year in the change of German views of England”.  

In 1871, Bismarck had placed the German Empire in a strong position though, economically, Germany was still far behind Britain. Bismarck, then, declared that Germany was a satiated power, seeking no further expansion on the continent of Europe. In many respects, German Chancellor’s decision reversed Germany’s policy in Europe. In the 1860s, his risk-taking foreign policy had led three wars and the reshaping of the map of Europe. Henceforth after 1871, Germany’s aim was to protect the status quo. However, it will also be true to say that “the Anglo-German rivalry was a rational and predictable outcome of German unity, with psychological motives playing only secondary roles, and with war as the outcome.”

II The German Challenge and the End of Splendid Isolation

In March 1890, the new Kaiser and his Chancellor were expected to discuss a major deal. On the day before Bismarck left office, the Russian ambassador had returned to Berlin with instructions to renew the Reinsurance Treaty (secret neutrality agreement) of 1887. Shortly after, the German
Chancellor assured the Russian Ambassador of his acceptance to continue the Reinsurance Treaty. But his decision short lived. 4 “By the Reinsurance Treaty, Germany promised to support the Near Eastern policy of Russia. . .Germany had helped to create the Mediterranean Entente between England, Austria, and Italy, and so far as the Near East was concerned, the one purpose of the Mediterranean Entente was to thwart Russian policy. The real friends of Germany-Austria, Italy and England-would regard the Reinsurance Treaty as a sheer duplicity if they learned of its existence.” 5 Apparently, Germany’s security concerns demanded that the treaty be ended. Subsequently, Chancellor Caprivi consulted the German ambassadors to St. Petersburg and Vienna. They also stated that the treaty be ended. Eventually, Caprivi told the Kaiser that there seemed no further negotiations possible. “Although it meant breaking his word, the Emperor concurred.” 6 Consequently, the Russians were informed that Germany was not prepared to renew the treaty.

International conflicts between Britain and Germany did not force a major reevaluation of Britain in the minds of many historians until after the launching of a serious German naval challenge to Britain late in the 1890s. Anglo-German naval rivalry intensified the search for a specific German culture as in the attempts to portray English and German Protestantism in quite different terms. Yet, given the almost inevitable need of new nation-states for a virulent integral nationalism, one must ask if the political unification of Germany would not eventually have brought about the same result without a direct class. Given this, after twenty years of peace, Germany appeared not only secure but on the threshold of expanding its power. The Kaiser Wilhelm II and the German statesmen enthusiastically argued that the German Empire needed colonies, the certainty of securing new markets and raw materials, a merchant fleet and a navy to guard all these.

Consequently, Germany joined in the quest for colonies, especially in Africa. However, it saw that Great Britain frequently prevented its moves and in most of the cases Germany expected to have Britain’s approval. Then, it became evident before the eyes of the Kaiser and the German statesmen that without a strong navy, Germany could take no action against the British anywhere. The architects of the Weltpolitik emphasized the necessity to have a large fleet too. The timing of the inauguration of a world policy was related to to changes in the German government. One of the most consistent advocates of this Weltpolitik from its inception was Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz.7 The appointment in 1897 of Tirpitz as State Secretary of the Navy Office, concurring with the assertion of personal rule by Wilhelm II, marked
an apparent break with the past. “The one overmastering purpose of Tirpitz’s life was to build up a
great German battleship fleet that would match on the high seas the primacy of the army on the
land. He pursued this aim with tenacity and political skill. The Kaiser was obsessed with being
respected and loved by the British. What better way to achieve this than to build up a rival navy,
he thought and supported Tirpitz.” 8 According to Tirpitz, the purpose of navy-building was not to
achieve equality with possible enemies; it was to provide a naval force strong enough to threaten serious
damage to the most powerful of the world’s navies. That rival navy—the British naturally—would not dare to
attack Germany, for the damage Germany could inflict would be enough to deprive the British of their
margin of safety. The argument called the “risk theory”. 9 Since January 1894 the government of
Germany had been trying to mobilize popular support for naval expansion. Eventually, the German navy
came into being a result of the naval laws of 1898 and 1900, which provided for a seventeen year war
vessels building programme.

Although the greatest imperial power, Britain could bring little direct influence to bear on
continental affairs. British Secretary of War, Lord Richard Burdon Haldane’s army reforms could have
been timed in any year from the Crimean War onwards, but it was coming to be understood that they
were especially relevant to changes that had altered British relations with the continent since 1880 and still
more since 1900. British expenditure on the armaments had been cut back since the end of the war in
South Africa. Moreover, Haldane reduced the Army estimates to 27.75 million pounds in 1907 and did
not allow them to rise above 28 million pounds for the rest of the decade. On the other hand, the Naval
estimates which in 1907 stood at 31.4 million pounds, were within two years to rise over 35 million
pounds and in the spring of 1914 were approaching the 50 million pounds. 10

According to Michael Howard, four factors contributed to the naval race. Obviously, the first
was the British perception that its security and survival rested upon its naval strength. “The danger that
casted most concern to her naval experts was blockade, which in those civilized days was
foreseen in terms of an interruption of trade sufficient to cause economic chaos rather than the
outright starvation of the civilian population.” 11 British Navy commanders had a strong belief that
neither a threat of invasion nor blockade was possible given that the possession of a superior battlee fleet
guaranteed. Secondly, the projects over submarines were yet to be developed. Besides, the mines and
torpedo-boats had complex tactical and operational problems and did not constitute an alternative to the
classical war vessels. Thirdly, as A. T. Mahan pointed out in his Retrospect and Prospect in 1902, “The dilemma of Great Britain is that she cannot help commanding the approaches to Germany by the mere possession of the very means of essential to her own existence as a state of the first order.”

Thus, the maintenance of a standard balance of power was not regarded adequate, in fact, it was considered of the first importance that the security of the British Isles depended on the maritime subordination of everyone else. Lastly, the decision taken by the Royal Navy in 1904 to construct the first Dreadnought which could outshoot and outsteam any battleship afloat with its main battery of 10 x 12” guns and its turbine engines producing speed of up to twenty-two knots introduced a new phase. It was the most powerful war vessel ever built. The naval rivalry was very much on people’s minds in both countries. It is evident that the introduction of the Dreadnought programme considerably embarrassed the Germans. The Naval Law of 1900 had made provision for the construction of battleships over a twenty-year programme.

Apart from these, the army, or in a more precise saying, the expeditionary force Haldane developed for Europe was inefficient and weak compared to the large, conscript armies of the Continental powers. All the great European powers used their resources, to the limit allowed by their economic development, in training mass armies and building railways to mobilize and transport them quickly, as fully supplied, to strategic points. Even the strongest might conceivably have to meet alone an overpowering combination of enemies. This had to be averted by diplomacy. So the balance of power, the paralysing of threats by precautions, was maintained by alliances.

For a long time, Great Britain had remained consciously, sometimes uneasily but more often with self-congratulation, outside all this. However, when Bismarck fell, the change in the international situation was sensed by the Anglo-French and Russian diplomats. At this stage, Lord Salisbury came to the British Foreign Office. As mentioned above, his acceding to the Foreign Office coincided with the expansion of German, Russian and French imperial influences. Salisbury, like many British politicians believed that the strength and prosperity of the British Empire heavily depended on revitalising the activation on high seas. He also saw that the future of the empire came to depend on a continued balance of power and looked towards a broader international understanding. In the Mediterranean, France was at odds with Italy as well as Britain. The Italian statesmen inevitably maintained their realistic view that if after capturing Tunis, France took either Tripoli or Morocco, the Italian government had to declare war even though defeat
was almost certain, the alternative was a revolution in Italy. At this juncture, Salisbury faced with a
dilemma. He thought that Britain couldn’t permit France to take over an other significant Mediterranean
country. An Anglo-French agreement could keep France quiet, though it might encourage Italy to precipitate a war with German connivance. As for Russia, Bismarck was sided with Russia and he had
told Salisbury that the Tsar would not dare move if Britain promised to support Austria. Ultimately,
Salisbury sought to strengthen his hand through concluding a series of agreements with the continental
powers. *The Mediterranean agreements of 1887, indirectly associated Britain with the great continental nations and the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy.*

Interestingly, imperial Germany began to give expression to its new post-Bismarckian orientation
of foreign policy in 1890 by abandoning the alliance with Russia and drawing closer to Britain. The
implicit intention of Germany was to gain a “free-hand”, and exploit international rivalries to advance
Germany’s global objectives. Republican France and Tsarist Russia thereupon drew together in alarm
and concluded a defensive alliance directed against the possibility of German aggression. Therefore, fear
of Germany was the essential rationale of this otherwise incongruous alliance. To make this point another
way, the choice confronting France towards the end of the nineteenth century was apparent. A policy of
reconciliation and trust in imperial Germany could have been followed. This would have been based on
the assumption that Germany had not exploited its strength. France could also pursue a deterrent policy
and it could do so through an alliance with Russia. France first sought an alliance with Russia, and after its
conclusion in 1894, heavily relied on this.

The policy of the “free-hand”, of exploiting international differences was thought out by one of
Bismarck’s disciples and erstwhile admirers, the head of the political section of the German Foreign
Ministry, Baron von Holstein. To exploit Germany’s freedom while the other powers confronted each
other also became the guiding motive of policy during the years presided over by Bernhard von Bülow as
Foreign Minister and Chancellor (1897-1909). As regards Britain, at the turn of the century a number of
pro-German British ministers, led by the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, were seeking a closer
alignment with Germany as a counter to Russia’s expansion. On the other hand, there probably never was
a possibility that Britain would have been ready to sign a formal alliance with Germany during the years
1898 to 1901, though Britain was convinced that to work in close collaboration with Germany was
indispensable to its security. The possibility that the chance for a far-reaching Anglo-German entente was
rejected by Hosltein and Bülow except on the impossible terms that Britain would share portions of its empire with Germany. Germans expected the hard-pressed British to become more ameanable later. In return British found another way and managed without Germany’s backing. Prime Minister Salisbury told the German ambassador in 1898 “You ask too much for your friendship.”

III International Politics and Growing Tensions: 1904-1912

Three years later than Fashoda, which enraged the French, British statesmen became uncomfortably aware that naval supremacy alone might not be sufficient in world where she had not a single treaty of alliance. Another alternative for Britain was to reach compromise settlements with imperial rivals. That was achieved with France in the spring of 1904. The failure of Germany and Britain to achieve a broad understanding in their negotiations at the turn of the century had led to the conclusion of the Anglo-French Entente in April 1904, but the division of Europe into two camps was not yet definite”. This settlement involved allowing French control in Morocco. Obviously, it was the disastrous German foreign policy that began turning the Anglo-French settlement of their differences into a partnership against Germany. Germany had also colonial claims over Morocco against France. In 1905, the Kaiser made a visit to Tangier and promised to support the Sultan of Morocco against the French. It was unlikely that the Germans were looking for a pretext for war against the France while France’s ally, Russia, was weak, having to face the consequences of her unsuccessful war against Japan both abroad and at home. “The Kaiser and Bülow in any case did not want war. Their aim was to bully France and Britain and to frighten them out of their recent entente. The result was the opposite.” In the end, Germans gained nothing from the conference which they insisted on being held at Algeciras a year later. From then on, in their turn, the British and French military precipitated secret talks of cooperation. As a result, French fears of Germany increased.

Constantly thinking about making alliances, the Kaiser was cruising in his yacht just north of Stockholm in the Bay of Björkö. There he met the Tsar and talked to him into signing a German-Russian alliance. However, the Russian ministers would not abandon the French alliance against Germany. As it can be understood from this incident, there was always an inclination to strike up friendships outside the general alliance pattern in order to settle particular issues, and certain powers in each alliance grouping found it convenient to work at times with members of the opposite group to check the sometimes
inconvenient demands of their own special friends. This was relatively easy to do, since the powers in theory, and often in fact, still acted together in the Concert system. Having failed to make new alliances, between 1906 and 1908, Germany enacted additional navy bills, not with the intention of building a fleet equal to Britain’s, but rather of providing for one that Germany claimed was necessary to protect its commerce and colonies against France as much as Britain. It was called a “risk navy” very often, one strong enough to make the British hesitate to attack and one to give weight to Germany’s colonial demands. In July 1906, when the British super-war vessel, dreadnought was already in the water fitting out for sea cruises, Tirpitz laid the keel of Germany’s first all-big-gun battleship, S.M.S Nassau, of 18,900 tons and twelve II-inch guns. With short interludes, Westfalen, Posen and Rhineland were laid down. 17 But, the German naval power was still very much behind the British fleet. In their turn, the British were very much determined to maintain a two-power standard, which meant a navy was a necessity, but “Churchill characterised the German navy as a luxury.” 18

The essence of the British proposals at the Hague Conference in 1907 was to freeze the status quo. But the German naval building programme was in any case determined by internal forces and Tirpitz was constantly under pressure from the right wing to increase the building of battleships. In the same year Tirpitz prepared the Supplementary Law-Novelle- which the Reichstag passed in February 1908. This increased the building rate to four ships a year between 1908 and 1911, so as to produce fourteen capital ships by 1912 and fifty-eight by 1920. The full scale of Tirpitz’s ambitious plan was to some extent concealed by his complex strategy which was intended to mislead not only the British naval authorities but German opinion as well. This was partly because of the enormous expenditure involved. Tirpitz also continued to exploit favourable situations, especially outbursts of anglophobia to secure additional funds for his fleet.

With the decline of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, the future of Balkan peoples, divided and intermingled in religious beliefs in tradition, culture and in socio-economic structure, preoccupied the European powers. Once Russia had recovered from its defeat in the Far East, the attention of St. Petersburg reverted to the Balkans and a rediscovery of Russia’s Slav mission. Whereas, it is clear that the Germany more successfully bullied Russia during the Bosnian crisis and at the same time attempted to coerce the French again over Morocco.
In 1906 and 1908, German government enacted various navy bills. Realistically, these naval construction programmes were brought about not with the intention of building a fleet equal to Britain’s, but rather of providing for one that Germany claimed was necessary to protect its commerce and colonies against France as much as Britain. It was called a “risk navy” very often, one strong enough to make the British hesitate to attack and one to give weight to Germany’s colonial demands. In their turn, the British were very much determined to maintain a two-power standard, which meant a navy as large as the combined navies of any two other powers. Meanwhile, some reports were indicating that the German intentions had turned to be endangering Britain’s two-power standard. By the end of 1908 indeed both the British and German governments were being blown almost out of control by the winds of chauvinistic public opinion in their respective countries. Reports from Germany, not only from diplomats but from journalists, were increasingly alarming. The British naval attaché reported in July,

“At the bottom of every German heart today is rising a faint and wildly exhilarating hope that a glorious day is approaching when by a brave breaking through of the lines which he feels are encircling him, he might even wrest the command of the seas from England and thus become a member of the greatest power by land or sea that the world has ever seen.”

This alarming information led Reginald McKenna, the First Lord of the Admiralty and one the most rigorous of Gladstonian economics, to suggest in December 1908 that the Royal Navy should lay down six Dreadnoughts in the building programme of 1908-9.

In 1909, Bülow was succeeded by Bethman Hollweg. He was conscious of, and opposed the excess of German policy of the naval programme and of the insistence on the Weltpolitik. He began with the right ideas, but soon figured out that, in Wilhelmine Germany others, besides the responsible Chancellor could demolish his efforts. Additionally, for the British decision to take up the German challenge and maintain her naval superiority at whatever cost rapidly had begun to impose strains on the German political system. Bülow’s attempts were also undermined by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Alfred von Kiderlen-Wachter, who in 1911 turned French attempts to increase their hold over Morocco into a second trial of strength and another international crisis. A German gunboat was sent to Agadir in Morocco to frighten the French. British reaction was evident. Britain would stand by France if Germany attacked her. The Kaiser was disturbed as this had not been his intention. Finally, the Germans experienced a setback in their Moroccon expedition and withdrew from there. But, they managed to
receive compensation; a tiny strip of African territory which France relinquished to Germany. In many respects, Germans had suffered a diplomatic defeat. “The sharp antagonism between Germany and England over German colonial expansion in Africa is connected to the Second Morocco Crisis. Statesmen in both countries were profoundly disturbed and made valiant efforts to remedy the situation.”

The struggle for power in Europe was moving towards open war. Germany was determined to be powerful at sea as well as on land. One separate thread in British diplomacy, formal and informal, consisted of direct invitations to Germany to halt or postpone the competitive building of warships. These began in 1910 and ended in 1913; they could only have succeeded if Great Britain had made some concession which would strengthen Germany very materially in some other direction, and this Great Britain was not prepared to discuss. In the international crises of Europe, Britain always aimed to diminish tension and remove the causes of quarrels, but step by step she was drawn into cooperation with the opponents of Germany.

The tension arose out of the Agadir crisis of 1911 led to further attempts to a reach an Anglo-German understanding. Consecutively, the mission of Lord Haldane, the German-speaking War Minister in February 1912 took place. Interestingly, a cardinal misconception existed at the outset about which side had initiated the Haldane mission. The Germans also persisted in believing, despite denials, that Haldane was empowered to conclude a written agreement. The conversations in Berlin were conducted in a friendly atmosphere. On the one hand, the British wanted to slow down materially the building programme of the new German Naval Law of 1912. On the other hand, the Germans wanted the British to agree to a declaration of neutrality in case either became involved in a war. But it was very difficult for the permanent officials at the Foreign Office to agree to this, because such a statement could endanger their relations with France and Russia. In the end, there seems almost no doubt that Haldane was cleverly outmanoeuvred in the course of the separate discussions he had with the Chancellor and later with Tirpitz and the Kaiser. Deflected from his fundamental aim of securing Germany’s agreement to a reduction in battleship construction, he fell into the trap of by-passing the idea that the negotiation of a political agreement could take precedence over unspecified naval concessions. Bethmann’s subsequent rejection, in March 1912, of the suggested formula, ‘England shall neither make nor join in any unprovoked attack upon Germany” in effect ended the possibility of an Anglo-German agreement.
So, the Haldane Mission ended in failure. Apparently, Germany was unwilling to slow down its naval building programme without some sort of political agreement. However, relations between the two countries did not quickly deteriorate as might have been expected; rather, relations improved through the cooperation between the British and German governments in the localisation of the Balkan Wars in 1912-13. It is worth mentioning here that France took the occasion of the British-German naval negotiations to press for a more explicit statement of Entente relationships. “The Kaiser may have believed that the naval race was bringing England to him: in fact he was watching his other country substitute a rigid policy where she had once shown flexibility and a determination not to be drawn where she had once wished to negotiate.” 22

This was the first time in history, between two powers of equal rank, that reduction of armaments had been discussed. The outcome was that suspicion of each other was increased. Germans choose to believe that Britain was planning to encircle them and would join France and Russia in war against them. In their turn, the British statesmen thought that Germany was bent on challenging their supremacy at sea and on establishing her domination in Europe as well. Germany was the more mistaken. A Franco-German reconciliation would certainly give Germany security and neither Russia nor Britain could do much against Germany herself without French assistance. There were people in both Germany and Britain after 1907 who regretted the upsurge of hostility. As late as August 1914, British historian, Humphrey Trevelyan, while acknowledging the need to destroy certain barbarian elements in Germany, saw much in that country which served as barrier to the more comprehensively barbaric character of Tsarist Russia.

Despite all attempts, German naval programme was expanded from the end of 1907, and just two years later Britain was gripped by a fierce debate as to whether the Germans were attempting a secret acceleration of their building of capital ships. Late in October 1908, an injudicious interview by Wilhelm II appeared in the The Daily Telegraph, in which the Kaiser claimed he was standing alone against a widespread German desire for war against Britain. As a result, an outcry followed in both countries. By 1909, there were rivalries in plenty in international relations. To the disappointment of Germany “What had been an attempt at Franco-German reconciliation turned into an Anglo-German conflict, with the French trailing along behind. The British fleet prepared for action. In 1911 war between Great Britain and Germany stood clear on the horizon.” 23 As Germany
expanded its army, even Tirpitz could not secure what he wanted for the navy. The German naval planners were also discouraged by the Anglo-French naval agreement of 1912, which led to the concentration of British ships in the North Sea. A strategy of distant blockade was adopted by the British—thereby reducing the North Sea to a dead sea. They were unlikely to risk valuable ships in waters where the Germans might hope to win a campaign of attrition. Unless Britain could be deprived of one or other of her entente partners, Tirpitz’s fleet appeared likely to lose rather than gain ground in the foreseeable future.

In 1912, Winston Churchill’s statement, when he came to the House of Commons, was a renewed proposal for a naval holiday. He said:

“If, for the space of a year, . . . no new ships were built by any nation, in what conceivable manner would the interests of any nation be affected or prejudiced? The proposal . . . involves no alteration in the relative strength of the navies. It implies no abandonment of any scheme of naval reorganisation or of naval increase. It is contrary to the system of no Navy Law . . . The finances of every country would obtain relief.”

The statement also contained a strict reservation: ‘I must explicitly repudiate the suggestion that Great Britain can ever allow another naval power to approach her so nearly as to deflect or restrict her political action by purely naval pressure.’ He mentioned that if Tirpitz accepted the ratio of 60 per cent superiority, then Germany should build nothing until Britain did, since 60 per cent was what obtained now. Churchill added, “That might be a logical argument, but it would I am sure do a great deal of harm.”

It is worth noting here that a naval convention was suggested (and repeated a year later) by which the two powers should bind themselves for a fixed period to join in no coalition directed against either power; not make war against each other; and to observe a neutrality should either country be engaged in hostilities with any other power or powers. However, Tirpitz provided further justification for British suspicions. As he had secretly allotted the building contracts for two ships in the Autumn of 1908 which were only to be authorised in 1909, paying very little attention to the talks being held, he continued to take similar steps. It might be reasonable for the Germans to reduce their fleet, if they could get a promise from the British that they would not to go war against them. I might also be reasonable for Germany if it could obtain such a promise even without reducing its fleet. But, none of these could be achieved.
British Foreign Secretary, Edward Grey was ready to declare that their aim was not the isolation of Germany, and that their understanding with France and Russia had no such objective. Negotiations took place from August 1909 to June 1911. Neither side changed its ground. Behind the determined expansion of the German navy there was an emotional need which did not derive only from the desire to possess the proper accoutrements of a great power. German navy was the vehicle for the technological advances of the late 19th century, and technological avant-gardism was one of its chief means of power. Moreover, in a dangerously united empire, the navy was regarded unificatory, and if not classless, at least middle-class. In addition, it was the main hobby of Kaiser Wilhelm II.

German army command was clearly growing jittery in 1912. Bethman Hollweg could still count on Tirpitz and his ever unready navy to aid him in urging a delay in bringing about conflict. The desirability of precipitating a preventive war against France and Russia was discussed by the Kaiser and his chief military advisers, meeting in the War Council in December 1912. But the secret meeting of 8-12 December came to a no more spectacular conclusion than to postpone war. Admiral Tirpitz had also opposed the army commanders who urged that war should be launched quickly.

IV Conclusion

The important thing was that the political tension and hostility which occurred between Germany and Britain was spread throughout the rest of the countries. Almost every country was afraid of war and wanted to protect itself. However, as mentioned above, the winds of war blew soon and as a result the Balkan Wars occurred in 1912-13. These wars were also a warning as to how near some of the powers were coming to the borders of tolerance. These rivalries, it is true, need not have erupted into a general European war and it was Germany, more than any other power, which brought this about. On the other hand, in South Eastern Europe the rivalries of the great powers had long been manifest and led to the opening of hostilities in World War I. In addition to these, the War of 1914 must be considered in general as the natural outcome of the cleavages between the alliance systems of Europe.

Germany had found it possible to expand its navy without serious injury to the army and its security in Europe. But Tirpitz never wavered in his aim to create a fleet which could deter an attack, though it would not be equal to the British one. Britain would be able to fight Germany only by risking its world position, given the threat from other navies. Tirpitz had a fear that the British might attack before his fleet had managed this position of security. The British could maintain a lead of about one-third in capital
ships, as they showed down to 1914. Tirpitz could narrow the gap. His refusals to negotiate merely served to heighten British fears and their determination to stay ahead. A very important point to remember here is that the British would be content only if Germany would cut down her naval programme without condition and, as a result of that, political relations would improve without a formal agreement.

It is worth mentioning that an army which fully exploited Germany’s predominance in men and industry would challenge France and Russia as much as the navy challenged Britain. Though the British were ready to declare that they would pursue no aggressive policy towards Germany and that they would make no unprovoked attack towards it, they would not renounce their freedom of decision. The Germans, however, wanted to eliminate Britain from the European alliances system. It is another fact that most British would have been ready to stand up to Russia if they could have been confident that Germany would not use the occasion to establish its supremacy on the continent of Europe. It is also worth to emphasize that the French government was alarmed whenever the British negotiated with Germany and the permanent members of the British Foreign Service did refrain from approving their state of alarm.

British naval supremacy had been least in 1911. They had been angered by the German refusal to slow down their naval building and the Germans had been angered by Britain’s request. The British found out that though with occasional setbacks, they could outbuild the Germans. Their naval supremacy grew steadily thereafter. In broad terms, the German naval challenge had worsened the conflict with Britain. Certainly, it was much easier, because of the naval threat, for the British government to follow a policy— they would have followed in any similar event-sort of a radical response. When the Balkans exploded, in the autumn of 1912, and Russia had to stand unwillingly in the front line, relations between Germany and Britain became better than at any time since the turn of the century. Some historians said that Grey could have averted the war if he had defined his policy differently. This can hardly be considered so. Germany had long planned to invade France through Belgium and would have not been deterred by any British warning. They had assumed that Britain would enter the war. They did not take its military weight seriously and naval questions did not interest them. Germany believed herself to be at the height of its strength. Ultimately, Britain and Germany decided on war as a result of their opposite motives. Because of the intensity of the rivalry of great powers and their military commitments, the war developed into a conflict of unprecedented scope involving the major powers of the continent of Europe.
Notes:

3 McClelland, The German Historians and England, 166.
4 Raymond James Sontag, *Germany and England. Background of Conflict, 1848-1894* (New York: The Norton Library Press, 1967), 267-68. Germany and england The Reinsurance Treaty was designed to replace the unrenewed Alliance of the Three Emperors (concluded in 1881 and regarded as reviving the League of Three Emperors. But, during the violent Balkan crisis of September 1885 arising out of the union of two Bulgarias, when Austria backed the Serbians against the Russian supported Bulgars Alexander III had refused to renew this alliance) between Russia, Austria-Hungary and Germany. Bismarck had replied a Russian proposal that in place of the rejected tripartite agreement, Germany and Austria-Hungary should make a defensive treaty of their own without Russia. Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), 73-80 passim.


7 Tirpitz was born on March 19, 1849, into a middle-class Prussian family. In the spring of 1856, he became a cadet in Prince Adelbert's navy. Since Prussian navy had close contacts with the British, he could closely examine the British naval tactics and had a strong esteem for the British navy. Besides, he was fluent in English and had made a hobby English philology. He spent years serving as a gunnery officer aboard the König Wilhelm and Friedrich Karl cruising the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and the Pacific. In 1877, he was assigned to visit the Whitehead Torpedo Centre at Fiume. On his returning to Germany, he was placed in charge of torpedo development for the German navy. In 1887, he met twenty-eight-year-old Prince William when his torpedo units escorted the Prince across the North Sea to attend Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. In 1888, following Monts’ succession of Caprivi as Navy Minister, torpedo flotilla fell into disfavor and Tirpitz was given command successively of the cruisers Preussen and Württemberg. Two years later, he was appointed Chief of Staff of the Baltic Squadron. Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought* (London: Pimlico, 1993), 168, 169.


17 Massie, *Dreadnought*, 487.


20 Black and Helmreich, *Twentieth Century Europe*, 33.


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