

THE NAVY AND GERMAN POWER POLITICS, 1862–1914

I. N. Lambi

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1862–1914



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The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914

Ivo Nikolai Lambi

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To my five children

Jon Nikolai Lambi, d.1979

Eric Robert Lambi

Peter Alexander Lambi, d.1981

Katherine Jean Lambi

Shauna Elizabeth Lambi



The German North Sea coast and Danish waters

Preface

This book is a story of power: the attempt in the years 1862–1914 to use the German navy in various ways. At first it was expected to show the flag, to engage in minor skirmishes in world seas and to protect the German coast, particularly against the French. At the beginning of this period the navy was small and its contribution to the Bismarckian wars was negligible in comparison to the achievements of the army. Supporting army operations remained one of its tasks throughout this period. Subsequently its expansion was decided upon. There was debate about how it should occur. From 1900 to 1911–12 it was given priority over the army and it was assigned the additional grandiose task of being the instrument of German *Weltpolitik*, particularly against Britain, and served as a sort of national dream of German imperialism and internal consolidation. But it was never completed for the fulfillment of its functions; it remained incapable of taking on Britain and the Triple Entente militarily; the diplomatic assumptions for its success proved inaccurate; it contributed more than any factor to the deterioration of Anglo-German relations and the “encirclement” of Germany; and in the form that it was conceived, i.e. in terms of battleships, it failed to assist substantially the German war effort in 1914–18.

The story is also one of an armaments race, of the allocation of internal priorities for the needs of defense, and of national defense planning (or lack thereof).

The book was conceived in the spring of 1969 when I visited the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv in Freiburg to use the naval materials to write a few chapters on naval operations in my then projected work on German foreign and armaments policy from 1871 to 1914. The introduction to the enormous holdings of naval materials soon convinced me that there was room for a separate study of the operational planning of the German navy before 1914, partly because of the light it would shed on the renewed debate on German responsibility for the outbreak of World War I, partly as a case-study for operational planning in general, and partly because of the information it would provide for the war plans of the Prusso-German army, whose archives were largely destroyed in World War II.

It soon became apparent that naval operations and contacts with the army could not be studied in isolation of other developments. They do, however, constitute the central theme of the book. The concern is chiefly with operations plans against France and Russia, against Britain, and against the United States of America. The plans for ships located abroad are treated only in so far as they involved operations against the European powers, the United States, and Japan. But these plans had to be placed in the context of the strategic building program of the German navy, which would only have impact over a long period of time: the plans of Albrecht von Stosch, Leo von Caprivi, and, above all, Alfred von Tirpitz. Until the

navy was ready for its aims (as it was not in 1914), its operational planning and war preparedness would be based on inadequate power. It almost became a joke among German political and army leaders before 1914 that the navy would never be ready for war. I also had to examine the tension between different naval agencies after 1889 when the Admiralty was broken up and even more so after 1899 when Tirpitz managed to split the High Command of the Navy. Not the least issue in this debate involved the contradictions of Tirpitz's long-term building program and the greater need to use the navy immediately which the long-term building made a matter of greater urgency. While Tirpitz played a secondary role in naval operational planning after he was appointed Secretary of State in 1897, his role as the dominating figure in the navy, although chiefly involving building, continued to influence immediate defensive needs, operational planning, diplomacy, and the competence of other naval agencies.

What is more, the operational planning of the Imperial Navy and the Prusso-Imperial Army had to be placed in the framework of international power politics. I have attempted this difficult task. War plans were sometimes prepared for their own sake, lacking relationship to political reality; more often they more or less corresponded to diplomatic conditions or the way they were perceived either by the leaders of the navy, army, or diplomacy. I have made extensive use of German diplomatic records.

I have almost entirely ignored the significance of the Tirpitz Plan for internal German politics, the role of the navy's propaganda, its appeal to industry, the political parties, and the public. These subjects have been well covered by other recent publications; their inclusion in this book would have involved me in rather pedantic debate with excellent if sometimes controversial scholars (whose contribution is acknowledged in the notes and discussed in the bibliographical essay). In terms of the navy in relation to German power politics, this is the most complete study as yet undertaken.

I am indebted to many individuals and agencies. I should first acknowledge the help of the late Dr Gert Sandhofer of the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv; Dr Fleischer of the same agency recently helped me to identify an important naval officer whose signature I was unable to decipher. I have been greatly assisted by the rest of the staff of the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, the staffs of the Foreign Office Archives in Bonn, the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, particularly its former president Dr Wolfgang A. Mommsen, of the Baden, Bavarian and Württemberg state archives, the Bismarck-Archiv in Friedrichsruh, and, during my brief stay in Vienna, the staff of the Austrian War Archives. I owe deep gratitude to Professor Paul M. Kennedy, Professor J. Michael Hayden, and my brother-in-law Dr David M. McConnaughey, who read all of the manuscript, and to Professor Hubert C. Johnson, who read much of it, for their time, effort, and many valuable suggestions. My wife Jackie, who read all of the text, criticized it, and was scolded in return, put up with me as did my five children. Mmes Janice Falk-MacNeill, Jean Horosko, Margaret MacVean, and Miss Suzan Piot typed many of my notes and

earlier versions of the manuscript. Mrs Jean Horosko, assisted by Miss Suzan Piot and Mrs Jeanne Marken, typed the final version on a word processor under the supervision of Mrs Jackie Fraser. While in Germany, I enjoyed the hospitality and help of many people, particularly my close friends Herr Peter and Frau Renate Bopp, my *Betreuer* for the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung Professor Dr Karl Erich Born, my stepfather's brother and his wife Herr Fritz and Frau Anne-Maria Deutsch, and the late Prince Otto von Bismarck. My close friend and former teacher Professor John B. Wolf and my adviser, the late Professor Lawrence D. Steefel, have been sources of inspiration and encouragement.

The research and writing of what eventually took the form of this book were supported by the Canada Council in 1967–68 through a Senior Fellowship, in the summer of 1973 through a Research Grant, its successor The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 1982–83 through a Leave Fellowship, the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung through a *Dozenten-Stipendium* from 1967 to 1969, an interim grant in the summer of 1974, and excellent accommodation and other assistance in the first part of 1983, and the University of Saskatchewan through sabbatical leaves in 1975–76 and 1982–83, several research grants, secretarial help, and general encouragement. Mr Keith M. Ashfield of Allen & Unwin was very encouraging and helpful. I alone am responsible for any of the shortcomings of this book.

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Beginnings of Construction, 1862–88

Apart from memories of the Hanse, the traditions of the Imperial German Navy go back no further than to the middle of the nineteenth century—to the naval enthusiasm of 1848 and the slow development of a Prussian navy under the leadership of Prince Adalbert. In 1867 the Prussian navy became an institution of the North German Confederation and in 1871 of the German Empire. During the Bismarckian wars the navy played only a modest part. Comprehensive plans for construction, however, had already been proposed during the Prussian constitutional struggle. They were not accepted by the Prussian House of Representatives and hence their importance is confined to their reflection of current Prussian naval thinking and to their anticipation of subsequent plans. A project submitted by Albrecht von Roon in his capacity as Minister of the Navy to the House of Representatives in July 1862 proposed an eight-year plan which was to provide for the construction of two naval bases, one on the Jade in the North Sea, where territory had been acquired from Oldenburg in 1853, and the other on the island of Rügen in the Baltic, and of a number of ships.¹ Coastal defense, involving possible offensive activity, and protection of Prusso-Zollverein interests overseas were the twin responsibilities of the Prussian navy.²

Roon's more ambitious project of 1865 followed the inconclusive joint Austro-Prussian naval activity against the superior naval power of tiny Denmark³ and took account of the Prussian acquisition of Kiel, a highly favorable site for a naval base. Bismarck had gained Wilhelm's consent for the transfer of the Baltic Sea naval station from Danzig to Kiel before Prussia had acquired that city from Austria at Gastein. He had also been converted by Prince Adalbert to the idea of connecting the North Sea and the Baltic with a canal and even considered extending the canal from the Elbe to the Weser and from there through the Jade to the Ems. This would have provided an interior communication system for the North Sea. The Minister-President supported Roon's plan and was to challenge its critic, the pathologist Rudolf Virchow, to a duel. A bill of 1865 provided for an immediate appropriation for the construction of a naval base in the Kiel Bay serving the Baltic Sea, for the completion of the future Wilhelmshaven in the Jade Bight, and for the acquisition of two armored frigates and the improvement of the armament of available ships.⁴ A twelve-year plan, drafted by Roon in cooperation with the Admiralty Council, identified Prussian maritime interests with those of the rest of Germany. The tasks of the fleet were to consist of:

- (1) defense and representation of the emerging shipping of Prussia and Germany on all seas and the extension of their rights and relations;
- (2) defense of the coasts and harbors of the Fatherland in the Baltic and North Seas;
- (3) development of an offensive capacity not only for the disturbance of enemy shipping but also for attacks on hostile fleets, coasts and harbors.⁵

It was maintained that limited finances and a relatively small seafaring population precluded the building of a navy which could fulfill all its tasks if confronted by a naval power of the first rank. The Prussian navy was restricted to second-class status. It was to consist of three basic types of ship: (a) armored frigates which were to maintain the high seas against the enemy, do battle in the open sea, and, if necessary, force the passage between the Baltic and North Seas through Danish waters; (b) armored batteries and smaller units such as gunboats which were to defend the coast but also be able to assist the frigates on the high seas; and (c) ships which were to protect indigenous and damage enemy trade on the high seas. In addition came dispatch-boats, transport-ships for landing troops on enemy coasts, and school and artillery units.

The fleet was to be composed of ten armored frigates, ten larger coastal-defense units, and fourteen ships for the protection and damaging of trade. Armored frigates “as the core of the battle fleet”⁶ were given priority. “The implementation of the fleet plan in its full extent will have to be governed by the availability of the necessary funds. None the less . . . the speediest possible establishment of a respectable Prussian naval power is absolutely necessary in the interest of trade and power relationships.”

Modest in scope, aspiring only to second-class naval strength, the plans of 1862 and 1865 none the less emancipated the fleet from the coast, represented the battle fleet as the core of naval power, and provided for a long-term building schedule without, however, requiring the Prussian legislature to commit itself in advance to the expenditure.

The tasks of the navy as defined by Roon and the Admiralty Council in 1865 were restated in the construction plan presented to the Reichstag of the North German Federation in October 1867.⁷ To fulfill all three tasks, “a navy . . . must be of such a strength and structure as to be able with one part to protect trade in the far seas, with the second to defend the coasts of its country, and with the most important and strongest part to attack the main force of the enemy in the high seas, throw it back into its harbors, and blockade it there.” The number of ships necessary for the attainment of all three tasks could not yet be determined. To achieve a fleet in an orderly and economical fashion, however, long-term planning was essential. “For the first stage of development a period of ten years has been taken, because within it the construction of the harbors can be completed and, further, a fleet can be built which provides the necessary defense and representation for maritime trade and fulfills the defensive part of the above-stated tasks, finally because in this period the training of the personnel . . . can be promoted which according to calculations is necessary for the fleet that is to be constructed.”

In ten years the fleet was to consist of sixteen armored ships and vehicles, twenty corvettes, eight dispatch-boats, three transport-ships, twenty-two steam-driven gunboats, two artillery-training ships, and five school ships. Nine large and eight small ships were to be commissioned for service at five overseas stations, and a training squadron of six armored and four other ships in European waters was to be ready for action in case of war or for the relief of ships abroad.

In the first stage of development, in contrast to previous plans, the offensive capability in European waters was played down. In the words of Kontre-Admiral Eduard Karl Emanuel Jachmann in October 1867, priority was to be given to the construction of those ships "which are suitable for the commercial-political tasks of the navy or for coastal defense," that is, smaller units.⁸ Only after the completion of the first stage could the third task, the offensive purpose of the navy, be realized through a more rapid construction of ships. The plan was accepted by the Reichstag with objections expressed only to the fiscal arrangements. Since, contrary to his Reichstag statement, Jachmann was an adherent of large battleships, he succeeded under the vague category of "sixteen armored ships and vehicles" to commission in 1869–71 the construction of five such ships, three in Germany, and two in England,⁹ and to purchase three others abroad.¹⁰ Three of these ships were larger than any other built in Germany before the accession of Wilhelm II.

In spite of the completion of Wilhelmshaven on the Jade as a naval base and the availability of the three large ships that were purchased, the North German navy, in stark contrast to the army, played an undistinguished role in the Franco-Prussian War. Probably in recognition of the weakness of its navy, the Presidency of the North German Confederation declared at Bismarck's insistence, shortly after the declaration of war, that there would be no action against French commercial shipping. Commerce warfare was only reluctantly undertaken later in the war.¹¹ As Albrecht von Stosch remarked, "It will certainly not be advantageous for the development of the navy that it had no importance whatsoever in this war . . . But thereby it is not damned for all eternity . . . we may eventually be in great need of it."¹² In 1870–71, Bismarck categorically refused to accept French ships in place of annexations on the grounds that there were no officers or ratings to man them.

In the new Empire "From 1871 to 1888 the navy worked under land generals." Roon and Prince Adalbert were both ailing; the former was incapable of retaining responsibility for the navy and the latter of assuming it. As no naval officer appeared suitable for or willing to take on the position, Stosch, a highly competent general, was to be the Chief of the newly established Imperial Admiralty from 1872 to 1883. Not lacking in political ambition, friend of the Crown Prince and Princess, Stosch was to appear to Bismarck as a potential rival and head of a "Gladstone ministry."¹³ His tenure of the Admiralty involved him in many conflicts with Bismarck,¹⁴ which did not advance the interests of the navy. Bismarck, however, did not discourage forceful representation of Germany's interests overseas by her naval forces as long as such action

served his aims. Stosch presented a plan of naval construction to the Reichstag in 1873 which was viewed as the guide for German naval development until 1897 when Tirpitz tried to link his first navy law to it.

Soon after being appointed Chief of the Imperial Admiralty, Stosch reported to Bismarck about the progress made in implementing the plan of 1867.¹⁵ He mentioned the impossibility of completing the plan by 1877 and the increase in costs. He concluded by stressing the need for a canal between the Baltic and North Seas which would augment the strength of the Imperial Navy, facilitate what was called “offensive coastal defense,” and make it necessary for the enemy either to concentrate much superior naval forces for action in either sea or to refrain from attacking the German coasts. The plan that Bismarck in 1873¹⁶ forwarded to the Reichstag revised the requirements of 1867. Increasing German trade, greater national consciousness among Germans living abroad, and more attention paid by established naval powers to German naval development were viewed as enhancing the tasks of German ships overseas. Their number was to be increased substantially to a total of six armored frigates (those that were also included in the defense of the North Sea), eighteen corvettes and six gunboats. There were to be two overseas stations, the Far Eastern and West Indian, an overseas squadron, and a substantial reserve.

Coastal defense was closely linked to the development of offensive capacity—both of which were established as tasks of the navy according to construction plans of 1865 and 1867. “. . . [It] is beyond question that the most effective defense in wartime lies in a firm attack on the enemy.” But, as Stosch stated both as a general and as a realist, in a major war Germany’s offensive strength lay with her army.

On 3 December 1871 he had written to his friend Gustav Freytag: “We need ships which are suitable to secure the merchant marine through offensive action, and the squadrons which we station on remote shores must also comprise such ships. But I consider large battleships still to be erroneous and superfluous for our conditions, since we cannot for a long time be called to fight a naval battle.”¹⁷ To the Reichstag he stated: “For one point cannot be forgotten in the comparison of land and sea war: every hostile place which is occupied becomes an actual success, a seized ship only becomes important when the sum total of a war is computed. A captured fortress secures a province. The capture of a whole fleet at the most provides the means to begin a conquest.” As for the offensive capacity of the fleet: “It does not, according to the now envisaged plan, have the task to proceed offensively against the great European states, but it should extend our power only where we have to represent lesser interests and where we cannot otherwise bring to bear the actual power of our state, our power on land . . . The question how we will protect our merchant marine in case of a European war is not answered, because the German navy would not be capable of doing this in a war with the great naval powers. This can only be done indirectly by our land forces. The German navy will only contribute to the outcome.”

The defense of the North Sea and of the Baltic Sea had to be viewed separately as long as there was no canal serving as an internal line of

communication between the two theatres of operation. Since hostile land operations were difficult because of the nature of the German coast, it sufficed to concentrate coastal defense forces in the form of batteries and torpedo-boats and gunboats at particularly vulnerable points. The defense of the North Sea was regarded as being easier than that of the Baltic since in it the vulnerable area was limited to the Elbe, Weser, and Jade estuaries into each of which the defending fleet could withdraw. The enemy, however, had the advantage of using British-owned Heligoland as a base. In order to prevent a permanent blockade “our defensive means must be at least approximately as strong as his offensive means.” Germany would therefore need eight large armored frigates, of which six could be also detached abroad. The defense of the longer and therefore more vulnerable Baltic coast was regarded as more difficult. It must be conducted independently from Kiel and from another base in the east. “If the German navy in the Baltic Sea were to be restricted to the single harbor of Kiel it would never dare to wage a battle in the east, for it cannot count on returning to Kiel with a damaged ship.” For the Baltic Sea, therefore, the plan envisaged beside the completion of the base at Kiel the construction of a dockyard in Danzig and the presence of six smaller battleships described as armored corvettes whose smaller size would be more suitable for its shallower waters. Twenty-eight torpedo-boats, two floating batteries, seven dispatch-boats and some gunboats were to be distributed among the Baltic coastal ports for local defense.

The eight armored frigates required for service overseas or for the defense of the North Sea coast which were either available or in construction, together with the six armored corvettes in the Baltic, formed a force of fourteen ships described as battleships. The composition of the fleet is set out in Table 1.1.¹⁸

Stosch’s plan was a setback in Prussian–German naval planning in so far as the offensive tasks of the navy in European waters were moved further into the background and coastal defense forces were fragmented. Greater emphasis was placed on overseas service, and the armored frigates required for this purpose were also to serve for the defense of the North Sea.

Table 1.1

	<i>Total strength</i>	<i>Ready</i>	<i>In construction</i>	<i>To be built</i>
Armored frigates	8	3	5	–
Armored corvettes	6	–	1	5
Armored monitors	7	2	–	5
Armored floating batteries	2	–	–	2
Corvettes	20	10	2	8
Dispatch-boats	6	2	–	4
Gunboats	18	18	–	–
Torpedo-vehicles	28	6	–	22

None the less, Stosch occupies a significant place in German naval history. He increased the number of naval personnel, improved their training and discipline, regularly built and replaced ships according to plan,¹⁹ and cultivated relations with the press, industry, and members of the Reichstag. Toward the end of his career Stosch may have realized the importance of emancipating the navy from the coast and using it for gaining mastery of the seas and for the defense of German world interests.²⁰ By 1884 most of the goals set by the plan of 1873 had been met. Only one of the twenty corvettes required for overseas service had remained unbuilt, although those that had been constructed were antiquated by the time they entered service. As for the naval forces to be used in home waters, of the six armored corvettes that were to be constructed, five had been built, four ships of the Saxony class, launched between 1877 and 1880, and *Oldenburg*, launched in 1884. These were ships of limited range, seaworthiness, and fighting value. Most of the required torpedo-boats were not yet available and some modifications were made in the plan. It had been decided not to build the two armored floating batteries because of their vulnerability to torpedoes, and to build, instead of the five dispatch-boats, thirteen armored gunboats, each armed with a single short-barrelled 30.5 cm gun. These were cheaper, could be more effectively distributed along the coast and could, together with torpedo-boats, attack superior hostile forces from coastal waters.²¹

Naval construction fared considerably worse under another very gifted general, the later Chancellor, Leo von Caprivi, who headed the Admiralty from 1883 to 1888. Unlike Stosch, Caprivi never felt at ease in his naval position and was widely disliked.²² He later described his attitude toward the navy as having consistently been that it “must be kept within narrow limits, as narrow as our conditions permit,” that it was to be assigned lower priority than the army, and was to be relegated to the defensive.²³ Tirpitz, however, claims that under him the navy obtained a strategic aim which it had lacked under Stosch, namely “to prepare a strong coastal defense for the next war against Russia and France.”²⁴

In consultation with the Admiralty Council, Caprivi made the basic decision at the beginning of his tenure to reject the primacy of cruiser war and to continue to build armored ships while emphasizing the new torpedo weapon. Bismarck tried to establish a better relationship with Caprivi than he had had with Stosch. He estimated naval strength in a Continental war as superior to the Danish, equal to the Russian, and, if the Baltic–North Sea canal were completed, able to defend the German coast against both France and Russia. In the face of Caprivi’s objections, which coincided with those of his predecessor Stosch, and Moltke, he continued to emphasize the need for the canal.²⁵ Otherwise he supported Caprivi’s plans, which were summarized in the “Memorandum concerning the further development of the Imperial Navy” submitted to the Reichstag on 11 March 1884.²⁶

The memorandum reflected the prevailing uncertainties about naval construction. Considering the tasks set by Stosch’s plan of 1873 as solved, Caprivi refused to propose another long-term plan for naval development

and instead looked at aims that could be reached within the next three or four years. Any long-range projections would be too theoretical and might either have to be modified considerably or become dogma that would thwart further development. The existing naval strength was described as a minimum for peacetime or wartime tasks. But whether the promotion of one or another branch of the navy should be given higher priority “would depend either on military–political considerations or on technology.” None the less, Caprivi admitted that the navy could not live from hand to mouth. He paid lip-service to the need for replacing out-of-date ships at a regular pace, partly to enable dockyards to maintain a permanent labor force.

Apart from those used for training, ships were classified into three groups: (a) ships used for political service, including unarmored corvettes, gunboats and dispatch-boats, (b) battleships, and (c) ships for coastal defense, primarily the requested torpedo-boats.

The twenty unarmored corvettes, ten gunboats and a few dispatch-boats located overseas were considered relatively useless in case of a European war. Contrary to the *jeune école*, Caprivi considered commerce raiding as an anachronism: “. . . the development of steam shipping has reached a point where cruiser warfare against merchantmen and passenger-boats becomes progressively less favorable. The manifold requirements that the builder of warships has to meet do not allow him to build almost exclusively for high speed, as is now the case with many passenger and other boats.”²⁷

Armored battleships were described as the core of a fleet. Without them ships used for political service abroad would lack support, Germany would be valueless as an ally in a war against navally superior powers, and be unable to fight even the weakest of the European naval powers or to attack any coastal place. “. . . [W]herever there is struggle for control of a part of a sea, one cannot dispense with armored ships and heavy artillery. Every European fleet must have in mind such a struggle and must prepare a part of its forces accordingly if it wants to remain a fleet at all. A navy which concentrates on the land or on the coast no longer deserves its name.”²⁸ Except for referring to control of the sea in relative rather than in absolute terms, these words are worthy of a Tirpitz. But then came serious qualifications: a battle at sea is less decisive than one on land and, as trials may determine, many small armored ships such as corvettes and gunboats may be preferable to a few gigantic ones. Caprivi was by no means alone in lacking faith in large ships. “The enormously destructive power of the torpedo and the apparent impossibility for even battleships to withstand its attack led many to believe that the heavily armored and armed warship was doomed and that in the future only small fast ships, armed with light guns and strongly fortified bows for ramming, should be constructed.”²⁹ While during the next three or four years a waiting stance was to be taken in the construction of armored ships and ships for service abroad, certainty concerning the development of the torpedo weapon and pressing urgency for coastal defense justified the demand for the immediate construction of seventy torpedo-boats. “The torpedo-boats are a weapon that is of

particular value for a power that is weaker on the high seas”³⁰ and, if well employed, would make a close blockade of a coast very difficult. Since 1878 the development of the torpedo had been greatly advanced in Germany by Alfred von Tirpitz. In 1886 the Torpedo Inspection had been established under his headship. He, however, concluded that the purpose of torpedo-boats was the support of the battle fleet rather than coastal defense, as Caprivi had thought in 1884. The cheap torpedo-boats “were considered by many naval officers as a type of panacea for the supremacy in numbers of foreign battle fleets.”³¹

By the end of May 1886, Caprivi informed Bismarck that increased Russian shipbuilding could make the Russian Baltic Sea fleet superior to the entire German navy, and asked whether any countermeasures were being contemplated. In a marginal comment to this letter Bismarck remarked that Germany would have to consider combined Franco-Russian naval power—which it would never be able to match—rather than just Russian naval power, since it was certain that France would join Russia in any conflict with Germany. He subsequently stated that he was prepared to increase the size of the navy to the extent that Germany’s manpower and finances allowed and asked if it could reach a strength surpassed only by Britain or France.³²

Bismarck’s encouraging reply did not affect Caprivi. In a secret memorandum, probably drafted in June 1886,³³ Caprivi maintained that, while naval power was important because of world trade, definite limits were imposed on Germany’s naval development by her inability to train many additional recruits and by competition for funds with the army, on which the most important military decisions depended. “Only after another victorious struggle for Germany’s existence has taken place will consideration for overseas relations of the Reich assume full significance. Until then additional requests for money and men will have to be kept within modest limits in so far as the navy is concerned.”

Ideas of the *jeune école* were again rejected. Germany was viewed as being in an unfavorable position for raiding enemy commerce, since the nearby Baltic and North Seas offered poor prospects for it and in remoter waters German raiders lacked the support of bases and coaling stations. For the raiding that would have to be done as a matter of honor or for the representation of German interests abroad in peacetime small unarmored cruisers would be adequate. In so far as battleships were concerned, Caprivi had by now also decided in favor of smaller units. In view of her limited means, Germany should avoid competing with other powers in the size, armor, and armament of battleships, particularly since many small ships could be as effective as a few large ships and since the loss of one of many small ships was less serious than that of one of a few large ships. But “Even concerning those ships used in home waters, we have to see to it that they are of such size as not to be confined to river estuaries and harbors, but capable of attacking in the open sea. We should not build a single ship or vehicle that is not capable of doing battle before Copenhagen or Kronstadt and which cannot fight by Heligoland.” Caprivi was obviously also thinking about more offensive operations.

Caprivi then elaborated on his earlier-expressed doubts about the value of naval battles. Important as a successful battle would be for the morale of a young navy which coexisted with a glorious army, the outcome of a battle at sea was less predictable than that of a land battle and the German navy would probably have to face superior opponents. Unlike those on land, sea battles were decisive not in themselves, but only in their results, such as landings or blockades. Nor would a naval battle guarantee the victor control of the sea, but only of parts of the sea such as the Baltic, the Mediterranean, or the English Channel. While battle was therefore not the aim of German naval construction, Germany was not to refrain from constructing battleships which remained necessary for use in coastal waters. And there were always exceptions to the rule of avoiding naval battle: in the case of a war against Russia alone Germany might want to seek such a decision as soon as possible.

To deliver offensive blows, one needed armored ships and armored vehicles "which should be at the same time capable of moving freely in the North Sea and, if necessary, participating in the long-distance expeditions." Caprivi concluded that the construction of such armored vehicles was to be the next task of German naval development. These were the Siegfried-class armored ships which he requested in the budget of 1887–88.³⁴ Ten such ships, now described as armored gunboats, each 3,000 tons in displacement and equipped with two 24 cm guns, were to be built in approximately a decade. The memorandum enclosed with the 1887–88 budget repeated many arguments of the June 1886 memorandum, some of them verbatim, but, in sharp contrast to it, took a favorable view of commerce raiding, according to Hallmann for the sole reason that faster cruisers had recently been constructed.³⁵ "Against naval powers with considerable sea trade, after the advances made in the technology of ship and machine construction, cruiser war, even if slow in its effects, can none the less become decisive."³⁶ The *jeune école* thus affected the planning of the German naval leadership. It was to confuse its building program until 1897.

At Bismarck's insistence Caprivi's objections to the construction of the canal between the Baltic and the North Seas were overcome and the project was approved by the Reichstag in February 1886 and completed in 1895. Extending from the Bay of Kiel into the Elbe estuary, sufficiently wide and deep to enable passage of even the largest men-of-war, the canal was to make it possible for the German naval forces, whether located in the North Sea or in the Baltic, to operate jointly or separately in either sea by using an internal line of communication and without risking the dangerous passage through potentially or actually hostile Danish straits. A completed canal would also strengthen the offensive capacity of the German navy. As the then Chief of Staff of the Admiralty, Kapitän-zur-See Friedrich Hollmann, explained to the Reichstag committee examining the canal bill, "With coastal vehicles and torpedo-boats one can defend the coast; against a blockade only an offensive fleet can protect us," which with the help of the canal could be emancipated from tasks of coastal defense. It would be no exaggeration, he claimed, to say that the canal would double the strength of the fleet.³⁷

Caprivi also encouraged the study of tactics. In the “Twelve tactical questions” which he posed on 30 January 1888 to a committee of naval officers as well as to several naval agencies, he did explore the operations of a fleet of twelve armored ships in the open seas against a hostile line. He inquired into questions such as what would be the appropriate battle formation, at what distance was gunfire to open, how the opposite battle line was to be broken through or surrounded, and what was the role of close-up battle or the *mêlée*. The questions were those of a sailor, not of a soldier concentrating on coastal defense.³⁸ Caprivi’s preliminary conclusion drawn from the replies was that “There is no doubt that any final decision in a naval battle will occur in a totally lawless and leaderless confusion, the *mêlée*.” In such a *mêlée* more depended on voluntary cooperation, morale, and the officer corps than on *matériel* or the personality of the commander, who could not oversee the chaotic fighting. “Rules for a *mêlée* are few and simple. For every ship sunk a hostile ship must be incapacitated. No ship should leave the *mêlée* as long as it can use any of its weapons. Torpedo-boats are not to leave the *mêlée* when they have used up their torpedoes, but are to hinder hostile torpedo-boats . . . the purpose of the *mêlée* is not the capture but the destruction of the enemy’s fleet.”³⁹ As will be seen in the next chapter, he also developed the operations plans which effectively freed the German fleet from the coast.

Notes: Chapter 1

- 1 Prussia, Landtag, *Haus der Abgeordneten, 1862. Anlagen*, Anlage I zu Aktenstück No. 153, “Leitende Grundgedanken für die Entwicklung unserer Kriegsmarine,” p. 1621.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 Reinhold Gadow, *Geschichte der deutschen Marine* (Frankfurt, 1943), pp. 32–4.
- 4 A brief treatment of Roon’s activity as Minister of the Navy is Elmar Dinter, “Albrecht von Roon: Seine Stellung und sein Wirken als Marineminister in Preussen, im Norddeutschen Bund und im Deutschen Reich,” *Marine-Rundschau*, vol. 68, No. 8 (1971) pp. 467–78. Also see Prussia, Landtag, *Haus der Abgeordneten, 1865. Anlagen*, Aktenstück No. 111, “Entwurf eines Gesetzes betreffend den ausserordentlichen Geldbedarf der Marineverwaltung,” p. 909. For Bismarck, see Hans-Otto Steinmetz, *Bismarck und die Deutsche Marine* (Herford, 1974), pp. 20, 22–3.
- 5 Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Handbuch zur deutschen Militärgeschichte, 1648–1939*. 7. Lieferung. VIII. *Deutsche Marinegeschichte der Neuzeit* (Munich, 1977), p. 83. For the activity of the German navy abroad, see Wolfgang Petter, “Die überseeische Stützpunktpolitik der preussisch-deutschen Kriegsmarine 1859–1881,” University of Freiburg doctoral dissertation, 1975, and Willi A. Boelcke, *So kam das Meer zu uns: Die preussisch-deutsche Kriegsmarine in Übersee 1822 bis 1914* (Frankfurt, 1981).
- 6 Prussia, Landtag, 1865, Aktenstück No. 111, p. 912. Different figures appear in *Deutsche Marinegeschichte der Neuzeit*, p. 83.
- 7 *Stenographische Berichte der Verhandlungen des Nord-Deutschen Reichstags*, Session 1867, Legis. I, Vol. 4, Anlagen, Aktenstück No. 106, “Entwurf des Gesetzes betreffend den ausserordentlichen Geldbedarf des Nord-deutschen Bundes zum Zwecke der Erweiterung der Bundes-Kriegsmarine und der Herstellung der Küstenverteidigung, nebst Motive.”
- 8 *ibid.*, Legis. I, Vol. 26, Sitzung, 22 Oktober 1867. Jachmann was Director of the Naval Department in the Naval Ministry.
- 9 *Grosser Kurfürst*, 6,779 tons and 5,400 HP, and her sister ships *Friedrich der Grosse* and *Preussen* were to be built in Germany, and *Kaiser*, 7,676 tons and 8,000 HP, and her

- sister ship *Deutschland* were to be built in England. See Hans Hallmann, *Der Weg zum deutschen Schlachtfloottenbau* (Stuttgart, 1933), pp. 6–7.
- 10 *Kronprinz*, 5,600 tons, in England; *König Wilhelm*, 9,800 tons, in England; and *Prinz Friedrich Karl*, 6,800 tons, in France. Gadow, *Geschichte*, p. 36.
 - 11 Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, pp. 26–8. *Denkwürdigkeiten des Generals und Admirals Albrecht von Stosch, ersten Chef der Admiralität, Briefe und Tagebuchblätter*, ed. Ulrich von Stosch (Stuttgart, 1904), entry for 4 January 1871, p. 220.
 - 12 Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, pp. 30–1.
 - 13 Alfred von Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen* (Leipzig, 1919), p. 11; Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, pp. 32, 35–7; 51, 66. Frederick B. M. Hollyday, *Bismarck's Rival: A Political Biography of General and Admiral Albrecht von Stosch* (Durham, NC, 1960), pp. 136–251 passim.
 - 14 Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, pp. 38 ff.; *Deutsche Marinegeschichte der Neuzeit*, pp. 103–8.
 - 15 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg (henceforth abbreviated as BA-MA) F 2030/PG 66012, Stosch to Bismarck, 8 March 1872, enclosing “Denkschrift betreffend eine Darlegung wie weit der in den Motiven von Anleihegesetz vom 9 November 1867 enthaltene Plan für die Entwicklung der Kaiserlichen Marine—der sogenannte Flotten-Gründungs-Plan bereits zur Ausführung gelangt und welche Mittel noch erforderlich sind zu seiner Durchführung.”
 - 16 *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags*, I Legislatur-Periode, IV Session, 1873, Vol. 3, Anlagen, No. 50, Bismarck to Simpson, 21 April 1873, enclosing “Denkschrift betreffend die Entwicklung der Kaiserlichen Marine und die sich daraus ergebenden materiellen und finanziellen Forderungen,” pp. 236 ff.
 - 17 Quoted in Ulrich von Hassell, *Tirpitz: Sein Leben und Wirken mit Berücksichtigung seiner Beziehungen zu Albrecht von Stosch* (Stuttgart, 1920), pp. 24–5.
 - 18 See Hallman, *Der Weg*, p. 14.
 - 19 See particularly Hollyday, *Bismarck's Rival*, pp. 99–136; Hassell, *Tirpitz*, pp. 23–47.
 - 20 He expressed these views in an article, “Die deutsche Marine und die Kolonisation,” which he wrote in September and November 1884, unsuccessfully tried to publish in the *Kölnische Zeitung*, and subsequently sent as a memorandum to his successor Leo von Caprivi. See Hollyday, *Bismarck's Rival*, pp. 243–54.
 - 21 See *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags*, V Legislatur-Periode, IV Session, 1884, Vol. 3, Anlagen, “Denkschrift betreffend die Ausführung des Flottengründungsplans von 1873,” submitted by Boetticher to the Reichstag on 6 March 1884, pp. 101–70. *Deutsche Marinegeschichte der Neuzeit*, pp. 127–8.
 - 22 Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, p. 23–4; *Denkwürdigkeiten des General-Feldmarschalls Alfred Grafen von Waldersee*, ed. Heinrich-Otto Meisner, 3 vols (Stuttgart, 1922), diary entry of 8 November 1887, Vol. 1, p. 332. For Caprivi's appointment, see Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, pp. 68–9. *Deutsche Marinegeschichte der Neuzeit*, pp. 129–30.
 - 23 Schulthess, *Europäischer Geschichtskalender 1893* (Munich, 1894), pp. 20–1.
 - 24 Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, p. 24; Hallmann, *Der Weg*, p. 25. Selden-Bibrans's assessment of Caprivi is more negative. He considers Caprivi to have achieved most in mobilization arrangements, transferring effectively to the navy his rich army experiences. BA-MA N 160/11 “Erlebnisse als Chef des Marine Kabinetts, Notizen und Aufzeichnungen.”
 - 25 Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, pp. 70–1.
 - 26 *Stenographische Berichte über die Verhandlungen des Deutschen Reichstags*, V Legislatur-Periode, IV Session, 1884, Vol. 3, Anlagen, No. 26, “Entwurf eines Gesetzes betreffend die Bewilligung von Mitteln zu Zwecken der Marineverwaltung,” submitted by Boetticher to the Reichstag on 11 March 1884, enclosing the “Denkschrift betreffend die weitere Entwicklung der Kaiserlichen Marine,” pp. 430 ff.
 - 27 *ibid.*, “Denkschrift,” p. 434.
 - 28 *ibid.*, p. 435.
 - 29 Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (London, 1940), p. 124.
 - 30 “Denkschrift,” p. 437.
 - 31 Hassell, *Tirpitz*, p. 51; *Deutsche Marinegeschichte der Neuzeit*, p. 133.
 - 32 Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, p. 72.
 - 33 BA-MA, F 3187, Adhib. 18, III, 1.–1., Vol. 1, “Über die weitere Entwicklung der Marine.” At first glance this memorandum appears to be dated 14 June 1882. But on that date Caprivi had as yet nothing to do with the navy and the file concerned opens in March

1883 and has no closing date. Upon closer examination the figure 2 may be carelessly executed 6 or 4. Moreover, the request made in this memorandum for small armored ships for coastal defense suggests a date close to 1887 when such ships were requested from the Reichstag. I therefore suggest 14 June 1886 as the date for the document.

34 Hallmann, *Der Weg*, p. 35.

35 *ibid.*

36 Quoted from Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan: Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II* (Düsseldorf, 1971), p. 55.

37 A summary of Hollmann's comments appears in *Stenographische Berichte*, pp. 678–9, Anlagen, No. 149, "Bericht der XI Kommission über den derselben zur Vorberathung überwiesenen Gesetzentwurf, betreffend die Herstellung des Nord-Ostseekanals."

38 BA-MA, N 253(Nachlass Tirpitz)/35, Caprivi, "Zwölf taktische Fragen."

39 *ibid.*, Caprivi to Knorr, Chef der Manöverflotte, 1 April 1888, "Nur zur vertraulichen Kenntniss für die Herrn Offiziere."

2

Operations Plans under Stosch and Caprivi, 1877–88

Tirpitz was to claim that “Stosch hardly had to reckon with a direct enemy.” In the first years of Stosch’s tenure of office the navy held an insignificant position beside the victorious army on which, of course, fell the burden of operations in a continental war against France, or, as generally anticipated by Moltke after 1879, against both France and Russia.¹ In such a war the Imperial Navy had as its main bases the Baltic Sea station in Kiel and the North Sea station in Wilhelmshaven. Another important harbor in the Baltic Sea was Danzig. Naval operations had to take account of the geography of the German coasts. Denmark divided German naval operations into two theaters of war. Her probable hostility to Germany because of the legacy of Schleswig-Holstein would create serious difficulties for the movement of German warships through the Danish Belts and the Sound in wartime. Danish territory could also serve as a base of operations of other powers against Germany. The two theaters of war would be united through the construction of a canal linking the Kiel Bay with the Elbe; its construction was started only in 1887 and it was finally opened in 1895.

Several North Sea islands, among them Borkum, Sylt, Pellworm, and above all Heligoland (in British possession until 1890), were important for German naval operations. These islands, if unfortified, could be seized by a stronger naval power and used as bases for the blockade of the German North Sea coast. But, if strongly fortified, they would serve as an effective deterrent and defense against a close blockade. Ships in the North Sea naval station in Wilhelmshaven, in the Jade Bight toward the west of the German North Sea coast, were exposed to the danger of being cut off from the rest of the German fleet by a strong naval power at the beginning of war. The German Baltic Sea coast was longer and less defensible than that of the North Sea. Until the completion of the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal a powerful enemy in control of Danish waters could threaten to enclose the German Baltic Sea forces in their major base in Kiel. Ships at the Danzig base could be cut off by energetic Russian action. The eastern location of the fortress of Königsberg, which served as the base for the First Army Corps, exposed it to the danger of being cut off by Russian land forces. This eventuality posed the problem of Königsberg having to be supplied and reinforced by sea. This possible task, as well as naval action against the Russian coast for the support of the operations of the army, raised in the eastern war theater more acutely than in the west the need of army–navy cooperation.

If Germany's naval forces were divided by geography, so were those of her potential continental enemies. The Russian European naval forces were after 1871 concentrated in the Baltic and the Black Seas. The latter were legally confined by the closure of the Turkish straits. If the former were deployed in the Russian naval base of Kronstadt or in the ports of the Gulf of Finland, they could be bottled up there by energetic German action. French naval forces were also divided between the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, and the English Channel, with Toulon, Brest, and Cherbourg respectively serving as the main bases. In a war with France, Germany would at first have to contend with the French northern fleet. After the conclusion of the Triple Alliance in 1882, French Mediterranean forces might be tied down by the Italians and Austrians; in any case it would take time before they could arrive in the north. With a Denmark friendly or allied to France and Russia it would not be difficult for the French northern and the Russian Baltic forces to unite for common action against Germany; until the completion of the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal it was easier for them than for the German North Sea and Baltic Sea fleets to unite. It was not impossible for the Russian Black Sea forces to join the French Mediterranean forces, if the Russian forces were able, contrary to international law, to force the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, for common action against Austria-Hungary and Italy in the Mediterranean or even eventually for action against Germany in the north. On the other hand, common Austro-Italian action in the Mediterranean was hampered by mutual suspicion that continued to exist in spite of the conclusion of the Triple Alliance and, except for the most unusual circumstances, common action between the German and the Austro-Italian fleets could be ruled out altogether. In a war between the Triple Alliance and France or France allied with Russia, all that the German navy could do was to encourage its allies by its own energetic action.

The army at first did not seriously count on the navy in a continental war. In 1873, Moltke expected the powerful French navy to take offensive action which might involve a landing on the German coast at the beginning of war. To counter it a sufficient number of German land troops were to be kept back. "An army and navy so formed operate at first entirely independently of one another; reciprocal direct support cannot take place. Until the moment that a landing actually occurs the fleet at first has the offensive and the army the passive waiting."² Moltke subsequently played down the danger of a landing, claiming that "in a civilized, densely populated country covered by roads and railways a catastrophe can be predicted for an invading enemy,"³ but considered the German North Sea coast, especially Hamburg, Bremen, and Wilhelmshaven, vulnerable to destruction either by enemy ships or by landing parties. In 1879 the Admiralty concluded that the defense of the home waters was to have priority over the use of ships abroad. After a war game, Stosch considered an offensive against the French northern coast which was to include mine-laying.⁴

The first fairly well documented naval operations plan originated in March 1882. At that time, in spite of the Three Emperors' Alliance

concluded in the previous year, there was considerable concern in the German military and political leadership about the possibility of a war with France and Russia, chiefly because of General Skobelev's visit to Paris where he was well received and because of his anti-German statements in Warsaw.⁵ Count Alfred von Waldersee, Quartermaster-General in the Great General Staff, remarked on 1 March: "Conditions in Russia, the evidently weak and timorous Emperor Alexander, and in addition the uprising in Herzegovina are grave matters which now make it necessary for me to devote particular attention to our deployment [*Aufmarsch*] on our eastern border."⁶ Although Bismarck did not at this time expect a war with Russia to be imminent, Moltke shared Waldersee's concern.⁷ The Great General Staff intended to wage a two-front war by launching an opening offensive against Russia,⁸ expecting that a decision could more easily be reached in the wider expanses of the east than against the well-fortified French positions in the west. Moltke did not hope for a repetition of the rapid and total military decision of 1870–71. Bismarck disagreed with the General Staff also in respect to the choice of the direction of the offensive, "for in Russia there exist no objects whose seizure could end the war."⁹

It is therefore most probable that the initiative for the preparation of the naval operations plan of 1882 came from the army. In the Admiralty, tasks such as war preparation, mobilization, the keeping of ships in service, and coastal defense were handled by sections (Dezernate) 1–3 of the "A" or Military Department, which was headed by the Chief of Staff. On 12 March the incumbent of that office, Eduard von Knorr, instructed the officers of the "A" department to make preparations for a war with Russia in July.¹⁰ From these preparations emerged two memoranda, both initialed by Kapitän-zur-See Karl Eduard Heusner, who was later to be Commander of the Far Eastern Squadron and Secretary of State of the Imperial Naval Office, the first dated 3 June¹¹ and the second 4 August. The documents are very similar, except that the earlier one also deals with the waging of war with Russia outside the Baltic Sea and is specifically concerned with a war in July, citing a timetable for that month, whereas the later one is confined to operations in the Baltic and avoids specific dates. There are differences in wording and statistics.

Heusner had at his disposal some detailed information about the Russian navy. He concluded that in armored ships and vehicles the Russian navy was considerably inferior to the German and would therefore probably take a defensive stance in a war against Germany; the German navy, however, if proceeding to the offensive, would face the threat of considerable damage from Russian mines and torpedoes. In view of its superiority the German navy should none the less take offensive action in the Baltic as soon as possible. This was the first of many detailed proposals made by the planners of the Imperial German Navy for offensive operations in European waters.

The deployment of the German naval forces, drawn from both Kiel and Wilhelmshaven, was to occur on the fourteenth mobilization day in Danzig or Memel. These forces would, according to the memorandum of 4 August, consist of seven armored frigates, two armored corvettes, four covered corvettes, four smooth-deck corvettes, five dispatch-boats, one

armored vehicle, eleven armored gunboats, one torpedo-vehicle, ten torpedo-boats, and a train. The strongest ships were to constitute an attack squadron. The first task of these forces was the elimination of the Russian fleet, best accomplished through a battle. The Russian fleet would, however, because of its inferiority probably avoid battle and withdraw behind the fortifications of its bases, the most important of which was Kronstadt. If so, the German fleet was to avoid battle with the powerful coastal fortifications but was to try to blockade the Russian navy with its light forces and the laying down of mine-booms, or to draw it out to battle. To achieve the latter aim, weakly defended Russian coastal cities were to be shelled. For its offensive operations the bulk of the German fleet was to station itself at the entrance to the Gulf of Finland. No mention was made of the establishment of a suitable base there. The naval operations in the Baltic were considered to be supportive of the German war effort on land: the elimination of the Russian fleet would deprive Russian land forces of its support and, more directly, the German navy would disturb the Russian mobilization and troop-transports and cause the Russians to withhold troops from the front for the defense of the coast.

Bold offensive action on the part of the fleet in European waters—without as yet taking adequate consideration of logistic factors or making provision for necessary bases—so as to support the war effort on land, which was viewed as decisive, had thus emerged in the operational thinking of the German navy, although it was directed against an inferior enemy.¹² Stosch approved the memorandum two days later, on 6 August, expressing his gratitude “for the industrious and fast work. I think it will be a good basis for the actual situation.”¹³

In a memorandum drafted by Otto von Diederichs a few months later the possibility of a war against both France and Russia was considered.¹⁴ In such a war the task of the German navy was to ward off enemy attacks against the German coast, secure shipping, and prevent hostile landing operations. Offensive action was again recommended against the Russian navy in the Baltic, whereas in the North Sea a “sortie fleet” was to be deployed in Wilhelmshaven for action against a French blockade. Diederichs also envisaged the disturbance and damaging of the blockading forces in the west through constant sorties and skirmishes in which the new torpedo-boat arm was to play a considerable part.¹⁵ The concentration of a fleet for sorties against a blockading enemy was, as Volker Berghahn correctly observes, “a typical idea for the future, even if one recognizes that the term ‘sortie’ [*Ausfall*] was borrowed from land warfare.”¹⁶

Tirpitz claimed that Caprivi, by introducing Admiralty staff voyages for the study of specific tasks in a war against France and Russia, which he viewed as imminent, departed from his own ideas of coastal defense and gradually “reached the request for a High Seas Fleet. Caprivi’s activity culminated in his working out our first operations plan, which he did in person, after studying the matter for himself; then he sought me out for comment [*Korrevison*].”¹⁷ Tirpitz is not entirely correct, for while—as will be shown—Caprivi’s strategic thinking as related to operations gradually became more offensive, except for cruiser warfare, it—as has

been shown—became more defensive as it related to construction.

On 29 April 1883, Caprivi asked a series of precise questions about the operations plan against Russia.¹⁸ He remarked in the margin of the memorandum of 3 June 1882: “Not the Russians but only we can in my opinion have an interest in keeping the war so close to the coast that the fleet would have direct effect. And only with respect to supplies; the Russians can use their railways for this purpose; for us the sea can be most suitable.” Fearing that the Admiralty may not have worked as realistically as Stosch had concluded, he queried whether contact had been established with other agencies, presumably the Great General Staff. Except for later stages of war, he considered that the most effective support that the navy could give the army, which, he assumed, would be advancing toward St Petersburg along the Baltic coast, was to maintain its supply-lines. He questioned how the German fleet could disturb the mobilization of the Russian army, doubted what effect attacks against the Russian-controlled coastal cities on the Baltic Sea would have on actions of the Russian fleet because of their being chiefly inhabited by Germans for whom the Russians would have no sympathy, queried how the fleet that was located at the entrance of the Gulf of Finland could be supplied with coal, and showed interest in a landing near St Petersburg in case of a defeat of the Russian fleet, and in the seizure of Riga as a base for the advance of the army. He also questioned to what extent the Russian war effort depended on imports through the Baltic Sea.

These queries indicate a professional concern for working out the operations more specifically and for subordinating the activities of the navy more closely to the operations of the army. The answers to them provided by the Chief of Staff, Knorr,¹⁹ revealed considerable modifications of the original plan. He stated that communications had been established with the General Staff, which welcomed collaboration with the navy. The navy could accomplish much by moving in provisions for an advancing army, using successively the major harbors on the Russian Baltic coast as field-bases. The mobilization of the Russian army could be disturbed by cutting off its troop-transports from Helsingfors, Wiborg, Reval and Riga. Knorr admitted that attacks by the fleet on the largely German-inhabited cities on the Baltic coast would have no military effect. He asserted that the German fleet, when located at the entrance of the Gulf of Finland by the island of Ösel, could be supplied with coal from the German Baltic Sea ports or from England! He suggested Narva as a landing-place close to St Petersburg if there existed sufficient protection against attacks by Russian ships and torpedo-boats, otherwise Reval or Baltischport, and agreed about the suitability of Riga as a base. As for the significance of the Baltic trade for the Russian military effort, he briefly stated that if Russia could fully utilize her own means she would be dependent only on imported coal, but past experience had shown that in wartime she drew heavily on foreign industry. This was a rather cavalier disposal of the possible effects of the blockade.

Knorr arranged that Caprivi's questions and his replies would serve as the basis for a revised operations plan against Russia on which Dezernat 3

was to begin work no later than 1 January 1884.²⁰ This plan is not in the German naval files. By the end of May 1886, however, Caprivi had become aware that the relative decline of Germany as a naval power was affecting her position toward Russia. The impending superiority of the Russian Baltic Sea fleet over the entire German navy would constitute a direct economic threat to the German coast and a military threat to Königsberg and Danzig if the German land forces suffered reverses.²¹

In spite of his doubts about the future, his public admission that Germany had declined to a position of a third-class naval power, his preference for coastal defense and, most recently, commerce raiding, Caprivi proceeded in the fall of 1887 to prepare elaborate operations plans for all probable cases of war. This was at a time when, notwithstanding the recent conclusion of the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia (18 June 1887), the renewal of the Triple Alliance (20 February 1887), and the conclusion of the First Mediterranean Agreement (February–May 1887), the tensions produced by the Bulgarian crisis and the Boulanger affair in France continued. There existed particular concern about the Russian attitude,²² especially in view of pan-Slav agitation and the movement of troops on the Austrian border.

On 6 December 1887, Count Philipp von und zu Eulenburg reported that he had to relate “some interesting but unpleasant news” about his recent visit to Berlin.

First is the growing concern about Russia. St Petersburg views a colossal and hardly controllable financial confusion and calamity and growing nihilist disturbances as springs for war preparations into which to flee if internal difficulties become too great. The concentrations of troops on the Austrian border are assuming a very threatening character. In addition we are worried because of Austria which in its incompetence does nothing.

In France the conviction gains more ground that . . . [the French army] possesses a better rifle than we, and this is not incorrect . . .

If Russia attacks Austria, then the *casus foederis* is present and France cannot be held back.

In Italy nothing is done for the army . . . Only Salisbury has become energetic and can possibly be used . . . So are things now, and the Chancellor is rather nervous.²³

Waldersee, now the most influential man in the General Staff, was most alarmed about the Russian intentions and proposed to counter the increasing Russian troop concentrations in the west with a preventive attack. He had managed to win the ear of the aged Moltke, and his views were shared by some diplomats, among them Friedrich von Holstein. Thus, on 8 October, Waldersee reported to Bismarck that he considered the transfer of another Russian cavalry division to the Austrian border a measure “of considerable significance”²⁴ but remarked to Herbert Bismarck that during the next six months the French would be entirely helpless before Germany.²⁵ On 16 November, Waldersee reported to

Moltke, convincing him that Russia intended to start a war in the spring which Germany should prevent by an attack in the winter.²⁶ On 30 November, Moltke wrote to Bismarck, stating that:

The general impression of the preparations made in the Russian army produces the conclusion that Russia is directly arming for war . . . Only if we, together with Austria-Hungary, attack Russia early would—as conditions are—favorable chances exist for us. . .

If we want to counter this danger in order not to obviate war under less favorable circumstances, then we must not tolerate the Russian preparations for war, whether they are directed against Austria-Hungary alone or against us. Winter does not present an obstacle to an offensive war against Russia . . .²⁷

Attached to the letter was an undated memorandum of the General Staff which on the basis of extensive data reached the conclusion “that Russia directly arms for war and through gradually advancing mobilization or by fits and starts prepares the deployment [*Aufmarsch*] of its army.”²⁸

Holstein remarked on 18 November that “the outlook in foreign affairs is gradually becoming really serious. War fever is increasing in the French army . . . And the Russians judge that the time is ripe for a war with Austria . . .”²⁹ On the same day the young Bülow reported from St Petersburg “that many things . . . recently indicate that Russia expects war in the near future, and is making preparations for it”³⁰ and three weeks later indicated that, although Russia had calmed down, she was not to be trusted, proposing a scheme for her break-up.³¹

Bismarck was certainly getting nervous. At the end of October he was beginning to doubt the pacific nature and firmness of Alexander III, remarking that he was too susceptible to public opinion, overestimated himself, and believed that the Germans feared him.³² A month later he suspected that Russia was doing everything possible to provoke an Austrian attack.³³ At the beginning of December he informally counseled the Austrian government to strengthen the forces in Galicia “since in case of war we will undoubtedly have the whole French army on our neck and therefore can give little or nothing to support the Austrians.”³⁴ Moltke’s letter of 30 November caused him to make inquiries about the security of the horse depots in East Prussia.³⁵ But his marginal comments on Moltke’s letter rejected the fighting of an offensive war against Russia³⁶ and those on Bülow’s dispatch dismissed the scheme for the partition of Russia as fantastic.³⁷ He, however, underlined parts of the General Staff memorandum and, according to Eulenburg, “was to a certain extent receptive to it.”³⁸

Caprivi’s operations plans were thus drafted at a time of considerable tension of which he was certainly aware because of his position. Although he was not close to Waldersee or Moltke,³⁹ as a high-ranking officer and in the opinion of some Moltke’s obvious successor, he must have been aware of the thinking and phobias of the General Staff.⁴⁰ There appeared four lengthy memoranda that were written by him personally: “Coastal war in

the North Sea,” 20 October;⁴¹ “Our waging of war at sea against France,” October;⁴² “The waging of war in the Baltic Sea,” 5 November;⁴³ and “Report concerning the prospects of the waging of war at sea between Germany, Austria, and Italy on the one side and France and Russia on the other side,” signed by Caprivi on 15 November 1887 and dispatched by him on the same day to Bismarck and Wilhelm I.⁴⁴ The memorandum “Coastal war in the North Sea” was reported on in matters of detail by the future Chief of the Naval Cabinet, Gustav von Senden, read by the future Secretary of State of the Imperial Naval Office, Friedrich Hollmann, and sent at Caprivi’s request to the Command of the North Sea Station in Wilhelmshaven. The memorandum “Our waging of war at sea against France” received further attention from a committee consisting of Hollmann, Senden, Rudolf Siegel, and Geissler. The others do not seem to have been further examined within the Admiralty. Only the memorandum concerning warfare between the Triple Alliance and France and Russia, which appears to have been prepared upon request, was communicated outside the naval leadership to Bismarck and Wilhelm I. In addition there exists an undated memorandum by Siegel, entitled “Thoughts about a waging of war against France.”⁴⁵

The memorandum “Coastal war in the North Sea” does not identify the enemy. The stronger western naval power is obviously France. As the title of the document indicates, the German navy was assigned a defensive task. Because of its limited strength, its operations would be confined to the Jade, Weser, and Elbe estuaries. A successful naval battle was viewed as the best means of coastal defense, but, if there was no prospect of success because of enemy superiority, that superiority would have to be eroded through constant harassment by German forces. “We can with certainty assume that the energy of the enemy will be tested more than ours and that a long coastal war will burden him more than us. We can with equal certainty expect that his ships will suffer more than ours.” Proximity to its resources, familiarity with coastal waters, and support of coastal fortifications would provide the defending German navy with definite advantages. While the destruction of the enemy was to be the final aim of the German fleet, its more immediate tasks were: (1) keeping the Jade, Weser, and Elbe estuaries open to German shipping; (2) observation of the North Sea; (3) offensive action when the enemy was located in the North Sea or proceeding from there to the Baltic; and (4) cooperation in the defense of coastal fortifications.

Specific German measures, which were to be considered at leisure in peacetime, but which were not to bind the fleet commander in wartime, depended on enemy action, in its more energetic form involving attack on coastal fortifications, possibly assisted by landings, and in its less decisive form the blockade of German river estuaries with sunken ships or mines. A superior enemy would be most tempted to attack the naval base of Wilhelmshaven—but for this a force of at least twenty armored ships would be necessary, i.e. the combined strength of the French Mediterranean and northern fleets. To counter this action, the German navy was to leave limited forces in the Elbe and Weser estuaries, and offer battle to

the main enemy force in front of Wilhelmshaven, supported by its fortifications. "A defeat of our enemy outside the Jade is the most secure means for the defense of Wilhelmshaven, and whatever would thereafter remain of our naval forces would have complete freedom of action." While the plan was a defensive one, naval battle was still considered important, and the fleet was advised against being too dependent on the coast. Blockade measures were held to be relatively ineffective against the blockaded party and costly to the blockading party. A powerful enemy was accorded an almost natural instinct to seek out the most challenging objective. Given these assumptions, a defensive war in the North Sea was not a hopeless prospect for a weak naval power such as Germany.⁴⁶ Similar ideas were to reappear subsequently in German naval thinking and to prevail in the Admiralty Staff concerning operations against England when Germany entered the war against her in 1914.

At approximately the same time appeared Siegel's brief memorandum "Thoughts about a waging of war against France." According to it, France with both her Mediterranean and northern fleets would enjoy so great a superiority that Germany, with her Baltic and North Sea bases separated by Denmark, would be unable to defend them both against her. She was thus compelled to concentrate her strength in one base. She might do so in Wilhelmshaven, as Caprivi proposed, were it not that Denmark—no friend of Germany since 1864—and Russia—a potential aggressor in the opinion of the General Staff—might join France. In such a case, a French fleet could advance to Kiel and the pursuing German Wilhelmshaven force could fare badly in the narrow Danish waters at the hands of her superior enemies. For defensive purposes, therefore, Kiel was a much safer base. From there, the flank of the French forces operating in the North Sea could be threatened and the French forces operating in the Baltic could be more easily worn down because of their great distance from home. So their defeat was a possibility.

Siegel also raised the question of an offensive advance against the French northern fleet at the beginning of the war, before the arrival of reinforcements from the Mediterranean. Except for a torpedo-boat attack, he dismissed the notion, for ships lost in the expedition would be indispensable for the later defense of Kiel. The question of a surprise torpedo-boat attack against the French naval base of Cherbourg was to be studied more closely, for it promised great material success and would in any case weaken French morale.⁴⁷ While it cannot be definitely claimed that the idea of an offensive advance against the French coast which was to be advocated in more bold terms by Caprivi originated with Siegel, for it cannot be proven that his undated memorandum antedated Caprivi's, it is interesting that Siegel's proposal to concentrate in the Baltic Sea against a superior western enemy was later seriously entertained in the preparation of operations against England.

In his memorandum "Our waging of war at sea against France," which he drafted in October, Caprivi considered in general terms various types of naval warfare against that superior naval power: coastal defense, activity outside of European waters, and offensive action against the French coast.

Coastal war received short shrift, undoubtedly because it had already been discussed in another memorandum. Two types of activity outside European waters were discussed: commerce raiding and action against the French fishing fleets near Newfoundland and Iceland. Both were dismissed, however, on grounds of being ineffective. France's war effort could not be undermined by cutting off foodstuffs, which she did not need, or war materials, which she could import through neutral neighboring countries or in faster ships. Nor did Germany possess adequate numbers of cruisers or adequate resources for the launching of auxiliary cruisers even if military honor and consideration for possible allies required the German fleet to wage cruiser war against the enemy.

Caprivi seriously advocated major offensive naval action against the French northern coast. This was to consist not only of a surprise attack of torpedo-boats against the naval base of Cherbourg immediately after the outbreak of war, as proposed by Siegel, and of possible mining of French ports, but also of an offensive thrust of the German navy against the French northern fleet before it was joined by the Mediterranean fleet from Toulon. Better preparation for war and quicker mobilization, as well as the shorter distance from both Wilhelmshaven and Kiel than from Toulon to the French northern coast, would enable the united German fleet to arrive there before the French Mediterranean forces. Between the ninth and eleventh mobilization days the German fleet was to bombard Calais with the purpose of rousing a public outcry which would force the French naval leadership to commit the inferior French northern fleet to an immediate battle. Caprivi was aware of the difficulties of the operation: its dependence on British goodwill that would be shaken by the German action in the Channel, inadequate facilities for obtaining coal and ammunition, imperfect intelligence about French fortifications, the possibility that the operation would be either condemned to futility by the refusal of the French northern fleet to come to battle or culminate in disaster if the Mediterranean fleet arrived too soon. Caprivi coolly remarked that one could well accept the loss of the eight or nine armored ships which would participate in the expedition if an equal number of French ships were put out of action for the duration of the campaign. A defensive war on the German coast could be fought without them. Caprivi explicitly refused to consider the use of army troops in the advance, pointing out that they could be better employed elsewhere.

If Germany were to have strong naval allies in Italy or England—not an unrealistic assumption at the time—then Caprivi was willing to extend the operations of the German fleet further to the west, bombard Le Havre and Cherbourg, and attempt a blockade of the entire French northern coast for the purpose of relieving the allies.⁴⁸ Caprivi, whose building program was mostly directed toward coastal defense, thus made one of the boldest proposals for action against a clearly superior enemy, relying on a chance of success arising from the division of his forces. Unlike the earlier operations plan against Russia in which naval action was coordinated with offensive military activity, the navy was now to operate independently with a battle as an aim. The battle lacked decisiveness, however, for even if the

French northern fleet were defeated the Mediterranean fleet could still carry operations into German coastal waters, although it would on its own probably be unable to attack either Wilhelmshaven or Kiel.

Caprivi's memorandum was worked through by the Commission für die Bearbeitung taktischer Aufgaben, consisting of Hollmann, Senden, Geissler, and Siegel, who produced an eighty-two-page document. The committee had been instructed to examine which measures were to be taken to secure the success of the operations proposed by Caprivi and how the operations might be changed in the interest of speed and practicability. Its report went into considerable detail, particularly in respect to the bombardment of Calais and Le Havre. It also expressed strong reservations, pointing out that until May or June the crews lacked adequate training for the attack to succeed. For the attack on Le Havre, which Caprivi was prepared to undertake only if Germany had allies, the committee also stipulated the additional requirement of Russian neutrality. For the bombardment of Calais it emphasized the need of an element of surprise, of thorough training of the crews, and of the highest degree of war preparedness,⁴⁹ which were lacking. In some respects the French were better prepared for war than the Germans. Some remedies were then suggested which led to Caprivi's comment, dated 18 December 1887: "If our conditions were as unfavorable for quick action as described here, then these insignificant improvements would change little. I have a higher faith in us, above all in our officer corps, and think less of the battle readiness of the French."⁵⁰ A deadlock seems to have resulted between Caprivi and his officers in respect to projected action against France.

Before getting this discouraging reaction from his subordinates, Caprivi had, in his memorandum "The waging of war in the Baltic Sea" of 5 November 1887, for the first time fully considered German naval actions in various possible combinations: Germany against Russia, against Russia and Denmark, against France and Denmark, or Germany, Austria, and Italy against France and Russia with Denmark neutral. The title of the document is somewhat misleading, for, although concentrating on the waging of war in the Baltic, the memorandum also deals with the waging of war elsewhere and constitutes the first full exposition of Germany's naval strategy against her possible enemies and of the power relationship between Germany and her allies and their enemies. The displacement tonnage of the battleships and seaworthy coastal armored ships of the major powers concerned was estimated as set out in Table 2.1.⁵¹

Caprivi boldly assumed that both the German and Russian fleets wanted to seek victory in battle. "Nothing protects a coast better . . . The German fleet needs a battle in order to remain viable [*lebensfähig*]." In line with the sentiments expressed in his criticisms of Heusner's operations plan against Russia, but in stark contrast to the operations he envisaged against France,⁵² Caprivi now recommended that the German navy, deploying in the strong base of Kiel for protection against surprise torpedo-boat attacks—such as planned by himself against Cherbourg—should await a Russian attack rather than advance into Russian waters immediately after the outbreak of war. Although weaker than the German, the Russian fleet

Table 2.1

France		
Toulon	104,000	
Brest	69,000	
Cherbourg	69,000	
Russia in the Baltic Sea	53,000	
France and Russia combined		295,000
Germany	103,000	
Italy	98,000	
Austria-Hungary	48,000	
Triple Alliance combined		249,000

was expected to attack because of the Russian offensive mentality. Caprivi's assumption that the General Staff also expected Russian aggression was corrected by someone in the margin by the remark "Until now the Russians have none the less steadily and successfully chosen the defensive." Once ready for action, the German fleet was to advance to Danzig, and await a Russian advance which might be prompted by the blockade of relatively close Russian harbors, such as those of Libau, Windau, and Riga. But an advance into the Gulf of Finland before the defeat of the Russian navy was definitely rejected: coastal conditions would make a fleet operating there most vulnerable to torpedo-boats and mines (*Kleinkrieg*), and the setting up of a base would require army support which was not available. If the Russians refused to do battle despite attacks on ports close to Germany, they would decline battle if the German fleet advanced into the Gulf of Finland. While Caprivi's caution about an advance was warranted, his expectation that an inferior fleet would voluntarily offer battle was certainly not. After the defeat of the Russian fleet a blockade of the bays of Bothnia and Riga and the Gulf of Finland and support of German land operations could be undertaken.

A potentially hostile Denmark constituted a threat in the rear of the German naval forces advancing toward the east. Caprivi, however, rejected the possibility of a preventive attack on the Danish fleet because the battle with the fortifications of Copenhagen which would be involved could entail disproportionately heavy losses. If Denmark did enter the war, the German fleet was to remain in Kiel, with the objective of preventing the Danish navy from uniting with the Russian and trying to defeat them separately.

In a war between Germany and France, Denmark was expected to join France if operations were extended to the Baltic. The possibility of a German attack against a French port was briefly mentioned as preferable to an attack on Copenhagen—an indication that Caprivi had not definitely committed himself to the notion of an offensive thrust into the Channel.

Like Siegel's undated memorandum, the document concerned itself with the taking of a defensive position in Kiel where the bulk of German forces in the North Sea were to repair. The uncertainty in Caprivi's thinking was also shown by his current assumption that the French Toulon forces would remain in the Mediterranean instead of proceeding north as expected in the October memorandum.

Finally Caprivi examined the situation in the event of a war of the powers of the Triple Alliance against France and Russia, with Denmark neutral. In such a war he assumed that the French would choose the Mediterranean as their more important theater of war because of their North African possessions and interests in the Levant and in the Suez Canal. To obtain the superiority over Austria and Italy necessary for a decisive success⁵³ they were expected at the very least to send their Brest forces to the Mediterranean. Subsequently, the focus of the examination shifted from the Baltic to the Mediterranean. It was claimed that the Triple Alliance should attempt to defeat the French Mediterranean forces before they were reinforced by the Brest squadron. For this purpose speedy union of the Austrian and Italian navies was necessary, although close cooperation between the two navies was considered to be difficult to attain. On the other hand, the French might boldly attempt to defeat the Italian navy before its union with the Austrian. An allied naval victory over the French was a prerequisite to further actions such as a blockade, an attack on Toulon, operations against the French coast or against Algeria or Tunis, or even for an energetic Italian war effort against the French on land.

It therefore lay in German interests to encourage allied activity in the Mediterranean through action in the north. Caprivi recommended a thrust against the French forces in Cherbourg before the third mobilization week when the Russians were expected to be capable of appearing before Wilhelmshaven. German naval strategy in case of a general war was then to be defensive in the east and offensive in the west with the aim of encouraging Italy to undertake offensive action on land.⁵⁴ Caprivi's "Report concerning the prospects of the waging of war at sea between Germany, Austria, and Italy on the one side and France and Russia on the other side" of 15 November added little to the above considerations except for expressing pessimism about the strategic situation in the Mediterranean. "If we can with some confidence look ahead to the war as it would be shaped in the north, then the conditions in the Mediterranean present fewer prospects for success. The joining of the Central Powers by England would considerably improve the chances of the war in the home waters and of cruiser war. But the Austro-Italian fleet would have a definite advantage from this alliance only if assistance in the form of the English Mediterranean squadron would be provided immediately upon mobilization and thereby its union with the Italians and Austrians would be guaranteed."⁵⁵

Actually the Admiralty had some realistic reservations about the effectiveness of the British navy. According to the German naval attaché in London, Kapitän-zur-See Schröder, it was deficient in cruisers and its personnel was no better than that of other navies.⁵⁶ Caprivi concurred with

Schröder's observations, maintaining that while the Royal Navy consisted of a large number of excellent ships no new constructions had been added to it since 1881. In making this statement he was wrong. In all, nine British battleships had been launched from 1882 to 1888. In order to avoid a partial blockade of the English coast by the French, the Royal Navy had to offer battle immediately after the outbreak of war—something for which its peacetime preparations were inadequate. It was simply not prepared for a sudden outbreak of war because of its weak leadership. Moreover, if the French carried out their plan to concentrate their whole fleet in Toulon, they could defeat the British Mediterranean and Channel squadrons separately.⁵⁷ Bismarck did not challenge any of the statements made by Schröder and Caprivi and ordered on 1 January 1888 that they be forwarded to the Emperor and the Crown Prince.⁵⁸

Caprivi's audacity waned. According to his supplementary comments of 21 November 1887, the thrust against Cherbourg was only possible if Russia was neutral or if her fleet was frozen in.⁵⁹ True, by that time he had learned from Bismarck that "we will not necessarily have to expect a Russian attack in the near future."⁶⁰ To a man supposedly obsessed with the notion of a two-front war, this statement did not provide a guarantee that Russia would not become involved in a Franco-German war or mean that Germany could keep out of a war resulting from a Russian attack on Austria. Caprivi therefore did not intend to go along with the advance against Cherbourg on the safe assumption of Russian neutrality: he stated the conditions under which the thrust would be possible.

Caprivi's considerations were related to attempts to negotiate a military convention between Germany and Italy. Plans for coordinated actions between Italian and German forces had been worked on by Italian military authorities since 1882.⁶¹ Early in October 1887, the Italian Prime Minister, Francesco Crispi, suggested to Bismarck that conversations take place between German and Italian army and navy officers concerning common operations. Bismarck, wishing to cement the bonds of the Triple Alliance in a period of tension, welcomed the conversations, acquired Wilhelm's approval for them, and established contact—sometime after 15 October—with the General Staff and the Admiralty.⁶²

Bismarck complimented Caprivi on his memorandum of 15 November and requested that its substance be communicated to Rome.⁶³ He considered the naval power relationship to be unfavorable for bold action and instructed: "Thereby on the basis of the data supplied by Herr von Caprivi it is in particular to be pointed out how desirable it would be if Italy would not enter a naval war with France without England. If Germany and Italy alone would have to fight off a French attack at sea, then we would in all cases be equal to the Cherbourg squadron in the offensive, [but] against the united Cherbourg and Brest squadrons our fleet would have to limit itself to the defensive."⁶⁴ Italy was to be restrained from aggressive action against France, just as Austria was to be held back from attacking Russia, unless sure of British support. Bismarck therefore discouraged the conclusion of military conventions, both between Germany and Austria as well as between Germany and Italy, for he feared that they would provide

defensive alliances with an offensive edge. Accordingly he refused to forward to Rome the war plans which Moltke had provided upon Crispi's request with Wilhelm's approval, pointing out that they were as yet premature and that mere military discussions would suffice.⁶⁵ The three memoranda prepared by Moltke, which at Bismarck's request were successively made more general, stipulated an offensive war on the part of Germany on land, just as Caprivi had planned at sea, expecting "great and decisive battles" aimed at the destruction of the French army,⁶⁶ which would relieve the Italians of French pressure, enable them to invade southern France, and dispatch troops to the German-French front.

Moltke agreed with many of Caprivi's operational notions. "Although the German fleet is capable of pinning down [*auf sich zu ziehen*] a substantial part of the French fleet, the latter alone would none the less remain superior to the Italian fleet alone in the Mediterranean. It can make difficult the use of coastal roads, trouble individual harbors, but otherwise not greatly influence decisive land operations."⁶⁷ In the memorandum which he submitted to Bismarck on 26 November, Moltke pointed to the possibility of the cooperation of the Austrian and Italian navies (prompting Bismarck's marginal comment that "the French navy is still stronger than both"), which would lead to their command of the Mediterranean. It could lead to attacks on all French Mediterranean ports, Tunis and Corsica, and the calling off of French troop-transports from Algeria.⁶⁸ It was, however, inconsistent on the part of Moltke to have considered offensive waging of war on the part of Germany in the west at the same time that he, in agreement with Waldersee, recommended a preventive war against Russia.⁶⁹

The military discussions held in Berlin did lead to an agreement in January 1888 according to which in the event of a war of the Triple Alliance against both France and Russia the Italian General Staff was bound to take an offensive against France through the Alps and to transfer six corps and six cavalry divisions to Germany to operate jointly with German forces on the Rhine.⁷⁰ The sending of Italian troops to Germany depended on their passage through Austrian territory. The government of Austria-Hungary reserved for itself the right to refuse passage if the war was localized to the west. It subsequently also turned down Italian suggestions for a naval convention, involving cooperation of the two navies along lines as indicated by Caprivi.⁷¹

The German and Italian navies were thus not bound to any common course of action. What did result were agreements between Germany and Italy to exchange naval attachés and information, and closer cooperation between the British and Italian navies. It is most unlikely, however, that the British promised naval support for Italy as Crispi thought they had.⁷² German diplomacy continued through 1888 to promote Anglo-Italian naval cooperation and to encourage Britain to strengthen her navy. "If England is not only pacific but also strong, then she would not lack friends in Europe; as long as she is pacific and counts on exploiting foreign strengths and on preserving her own financially, she will only be able to count on allies according to their convenience."⁷³

Notes: Chapter 2

- 1 Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, p. 23; Graf [Helmuth von] Moltke, *Die deutschen Aufmarschpläne 1871–1890, Heft 7 der Quellen und Darstellungen aus dem Reichsarchiv*, ed. Ferdinand von Schmerfeld (Berlin, 1929), pp. 77 ff.
- 2 *ibid.*, Moltke to Stosch, 22 February 1873 (Über die geringe Gefahr feindlicher Landungen), p. 32.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Walther Hubatsch, *Der Admiralstab und die obersten Marinebehörden in Deutschland, 1848–1945* (Frankfurt, 1958), pp. 41–2.
- 5 William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments, 1871–1890*, 2nd edn (New York, 1952), pp. 240–2, and Wolfgang Windelband, *Bismarck und die europäischen Grossmächte, 1879–1885* (Essen, 1942), pp. 310–15. For a recent treatment, see Horst Müller-Link, *Industrialisierung und Aussenpolitik* (Göttingen, 1977), p. 240 ff.
- 6 *Waldersee*, Vol. 1, p. 219.
- 7 *ibid.*, diary entries of 11 and 15 March 1882. See also Konrad Canis, *Bismarck und Waldersee* (Berlin, 1980), pp. 81 ff.
- 8 Gerhard Ritter, *Der Schlieffen-Plan: Kritik eines Mythos* (Munich, 1956), pp. 14–15; Moltke, *Die deutschen*, especially “Denkschrift vom April 1879: Zweifrontenkrieg gegen Russland-Frankreich,” pp. 77–81.
- 9 *Denkwürdigkeiten des Botschafters General von Schweinitz*, Vol. 2 (Berlin, 1927), p. 174. For French military weakness in the 1870s and 1880s, see in particular Allan Mitchell, “‘A situation of inferiority’: French military reorganization after the defeat of 1870,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 86, no. 1 (February 1981), pp. 49–62.
- 10 BA-MA, F 5593, III, 2.–2., Vol. 1. According to Knorr’s “Verfügung” of 12 March 1882, Dezernat 1 was to make provisions concerning all naval forces to be used, Dezernat 2 was to look after the mobilization arrangements and personnel requirements, and Dezernat 3 was to collect information about the Russian fleet and to draft an operations plan. Once the work of the three departments had progressed sufficiently, Knorr wanted them to confer. Then, following a meeting with or a report to the Chief of the Admiralty, further work was to be undertaken.
- 11 *ibid.*, “Die Verwendung der Flotte im Krieg gegen Russland.”
- 12 *ibid.*, “Allgemeiner Kriegsplan. Zur Übersendung an die Kommandos der Marinestationen und an die Geschwaderchefs, 4 August 1882.”
- 13 *ibid.*, Stosch’s comment on Heusner’s covering letter of 5 August 1882 to the memorandum of 4 August.
- 14 “Betrachtungen über die Verteidigung der deutschen Küsten gegen Seemächte welche gleichzeitig vor Ostsee und Nordsee auftreten,” 9 November 1882. Cited by Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan*, p. 51, from BA-MA, F 7599 (alt). We do not know whether this document had any official status other than being drafted by an officer in the Admiralty.
- 15 “Lage für die Herbstmanöver der Flotte am 10–11. 9. 1882,” September 1882, cited in *ibid.*
- 16 Berghahn, *Tirpitz-Plan*, p. 51.
- 17 Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, p. 25.
- 18 BA-MA, F 5593, III, 2.–2., Vol. 1.
- 19 *ibid.*, undated sixteen-page memorandum of “A.”
- 20 *ibid.*, notation of Knorr, 16 June 1883.
- 21 BA-MA, F 2050, PG 66104, Caprivi to Bismarck, 24 May 1886.
- 22 Steinmetz, *Bismarck*, p. 72.
- 23 *Philipp Eulenburgs Politische Korrespondenz*, ed. John C. G. Röhl, Vol. 1, *Von der Reichsgründung bis zum neuen Kurs, 1866–1891* (Boppard, 1976), p. 254.
- 24 Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Bonn (henceforth abbreviated as PAAA), Russland 72, Geh., Bd 2, Waldersee to Bismarck, 8 October 1887. Also see Canis, *Bismarck und Waldersee*, pp. 207 ff.
- 25 Bismarck Archiv, Friedrichsruh (henceforth abbreviated as Bism. Ar.), D 27, Herbert Bismarck to Kuno Rantzau, 9 October 1887.
- 26 *Waldersee*, Vol. 1, entry for 17 November 1887, p. 334.
- 27 PAAA, Deutschland 121, Geh. No. 12a, Bd 1.

- 28 *ibid.*, “Die Entwicklung der Wehrkraft Russlands seit 1878 unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Rüstungen im laufenden Jahre 1887.” Waldersee claims authorship for this document: *Waldersee*, Vol. 1, entry for 4 December 1887, p. 339.
- 29 *The Holstein Papers: The Memoirs, Diaries, and Correspondence of Friedrich von Holstein, 1873–1909*, ed. Norman Rich and M. H. Fischer, Vol. 2, *Diaries* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 359.
- 30 PAAA, Russland 72, Vol. 18, Bülow to Bismarck, 18 November 1887.
- 31 *Holstein Papers*, Vol. 3, *Correspondence* (Cambridge, 1961), Bülow to Holstein, 10 December 1887, pp. 236–40. Peter Winzen, in *Bülow's Weltmachtkonzept: Untersuchungen zur Frühphase Seiner Aussenpolitik, 1897–1901* (Boppard, 1977), pp. 43–4 interprets this dispatch as an attempt to make clear to the anti-Russian Holstein the futility of a war with Russia in support of Bismarck's policy of avoiding war with Russia.
- 32 Bism. Ar., B 27, Bismarck's marginal comment on Bülow to Herbert Bismarck, 18 October 1887.
- 33 *Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette: Sammlung der Diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes*, ed. Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Friedrich Thimme, 40 vols in 54 (Berlin, 1924–27) (henceforth abbreviated as GP), Vol. 6, p. 12.
- 34 Bism. Ar., F 4, Rantzau, Friedrichsruh, to Herbert Bismarck, 11 December 1887.
- 35 PAAA, Deutschland 121, Geh. No. 12a, Bd 1, “Aufzeichnung Rantzau,” 5 December 1887.
- 36 “Dazu werden wir weder den Rtag noch Oestreich überreden können.”
- 37 Fritz Fischer, in his *Krieg der Illusionen* (Düsseldorf, 1969), pp. 87–9, completely perverts the meaning of Bismarck's and his son's comments by taking them to refer to the whole document rather than to specific passages. For a mild criticism of this incident, see Fritz T. Epstein, “Der Komplex ‘Die russische Gefahr’ und sein Einfluss auf die deutsch-russischen Beziehungen im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Deutschland in der Weltpolitik des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts: Fritz Fischer zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. I. Geiss and B. J. Wendt, in cooperation with P. C. Witt (Düsseldorf, 1973), esp. pp. 158–9.
- 38 Bundesarchiv Koblenz (henceforth abbreviated as BA), Eulenburg Correspondenz, Vol. 2, Notizen, 27 December 1887.
- 39 *Waldersee*, Vol. 1, p. 332, entry for 8 November 1887; Eberhard Kessel, *Moltke* (Stuttgart, 1957), pp. 701–2.
- 40 Including Prince Heinrich. See *Das Tagebuch der Baronin von Spitzenberg, geb. Freiin v. Varnbüler: Aufzeichnungen aus der Hofgesellschaft des Hohenzollernreiches*, ed. Rudolf Vierhaus (Göttingen, 1961), p. 487, diary entry for 10 September 1908.
- 41 BA-MA, F 5598, Nebenakten zu O.K.d.M., III, 3.–1., Vol. 1, “Kriegführung in der Ostsee.”
- 42 *ibid.*, “Unsere Kriegführung zur See gegen Frankreich.”
- 43 BA-MA, F 5244, III, 2.–7., Vol. 1, “Kriegführung in der Ostsee.”
- 44 BA-MA, F 5598, Nebenakten zu O.K.d.M., III, 3.–1., Vol. 1, “Bericht über die Aussichten der Kriegführung zur See zwischen Deutschland, Oesterreich und Italien einerseits und Frankreich und Russland andererseits.”
- 45 *ibid.*, undated document on which there is written “Caprivi?!” and subsequently “Siegel!” It is in Siegel's handwriting. It is entitled “Gedanken über einer Kriegsführung [*sic*] gegen Frankreich.”
- 46 *ibid.*, “Küstenkrieg in der Nordsee.”
- 47 *ibid.*, “Gedanken über einer Kriegsführung [*sic*] gegen Frankreich.”
- 48 *ibid.*, “Unsere Kriegführung zur See gegen Frankreich,” October 1887.
- 49 This statement produced Caprivi's marginal comment that the expectation was too high: “Das lässt sich im Kriege nie fordern, man muss immer zufrieden sein, wenn das Mittelmässige erreicht wird.” That led to the anonymous rejoinder in the margin: “Für den beabsichtigten Gewaltstreich muss aber mehr als ‘Mittelmässige’ gefordert werden” (*ibid.*).
- 50 *ibid.*, n.d., but commented on by Caprivi on 18 December 1887, “Ausarbeitung der in der Denkschrift Seiner Exzellenz des Herrn Chef der Admiralität vom Oktober 1887 betreffend den Kriegsfall mit Frankreich gegebenen Direktiven seitens der ‘Kommission für Bearbeitung takischen Aufgaben!’ ”
- 51 Slightly different figures are given by someone in pencil in the margin of the document. The major difference lies in the tonnage of the Russian Baltic Sea fleet being estimated at 75,000.

- 52 See above, pp. 17; 22 ff.
- 53 See Table 2.1 on p. 24.
- 54 BA-MA, F 5244, III, 2.–7., Vol. 1, “Kriegführung in der Ostsee,” 5 November 1887.
- 55 BA-MA, F 5598, Nebenakten zu O.K.d.M., III, 3.–1., Vol. 1, Caprivi, 15 November 1887, “Bericht über die Aussichten der Kriegführung zur See zwischen Deutschland, Oesterreich u. Italien einerseits und Frankreich und Russland andererseits.”
- 56 PAAA, England 71b, Vol. 1, Schröder’s report of 20 December 1886.
- 57 *ibid.*, Caprivi to Bismarck, 31 December 1886, in response to Berchem’s request on Bismarck’s behalf for a reaction to Schröder’s report of 20 December 1886. For British constructions, see Marder, *Anatomy*, app. 1, p. 547.
- 58 PAAA, England 71b, Vol. 1, Bismarck’s instruction of 1 January 1888.
- 59 *ibid.*, Deutschland 143, Geh., Bd 1, memorandum dated 21 November 1887, initialed H(olstein), entitled “Ergänzende Bemerkungen des Generals von Caprivi.”
- 60 BA-MA, F 5598, Nebenakten zu O.K.d.M., III, 3.–1., Vol. 1, Herbert Bismarck to Caprivi, 18 November 1887.
- 61 GP, VI, No. 1290, report of Major von Engelbrecht, military attaché in Rome, pp. 225–8.
- 62 PAAA, Deutschland 143, Geh., Bd 1, Herbert Bismarck to Wilhelm I, 3 October 1887. The most important part of the communication is reprinted in GP, VI, No. 1291, pp. 228–9; also see GP, VI, No. 1292, Herbert Bismarck to Count zu Solms-Sonnenwalde, ambassador in Rome, 15 October 1887, pp. 229–30, in which there is a statement that Herbert Bismarck will get in touch with the Chiefs of the General Staff and the Admiralty.
- 63 BA-MA, F 5598, Nebenakten zu O.K.d.M., III, 3.–1., Vol. 1, Herbert Bismarck to Caprivi, 18 November 1887. Caprivi initially agreed: *ibid.*, Caprivi to Herbert Bismarck, draft, 18 November 1887; later, however, he expressed the wish that the Italians should not be informed of the advantages that faster mobilization provided for Germany, for any leakage of this information to the French would enable them to remedy the situation. PAAA, Deutschland 143, Geh., Bd 1, “Ergänzende Bemerkungen . . .”, 21 November 1887.
- 64 PAAA, Deutschland 143, Geh., Bd 1, Rottenburg’s notation, 17 November 1887. A truncated version of Caprivi’s memorandum of 15 November was forwarded to Solms by Herbert Bismarck on 23 November 1887: *ibid.*
- 65 GP, VI, No. 1296, Bismarck to Foreign Office, 24 November 1887, p. 234; also PAAA, “Deutschland 143, Geh., Bd 1, marginal comment on “Denkschrift betreffend militärische Vorbesprechungen für einen von Deutschland und Italien gegen Frankreich zu führenden Krieg,” submitted by Moltke to Bismarck on 26 November 1887.
- 66 GP, VI, No. 1295, “Vorläufige Darlegung des Generalfeldmarschalls Grafen von Moltke über eine eventuelle militärische Kooperation Deutschlands und Italiens gegen Frankreich,” November 1887, p. 232.
- 67 *ibid.*, p. 233.
- 68 PAAA, Deutschland 143, Geh., Bd 1, “Denkschrift. . .”, submitted by Moltke to Bismarck on 26 November 1887.
- 69 *ibid.*, Deutschland 121, Geh. No. 12a, Bd 1, Moltke to Bismarck, 30 November 1887. See also Canis, *Bismarck und Waldersee*, pp. 220 ff.
- 70 GP, VI, No. 1307, Moltke to Bismarck, 23 January 1888, and enclosure, pp. 247–9.
- 71 *ibid.*, VI, No. 1323, Solms to Bismarck, 22 July 1889, pp. 265–6, and No. 1324, Solms to Bismarck, 23 July, pp. 266–7.
- 72 Langer, *European Alliances*, pp. 479–81; Marder, *Anatomy*, pp. 129, n. 18; 141–3.
- 73 PAAA, England 71b, Vol. 5, notation of Rantzau, Friedrichsruh, 20 August 1888, instructing the Foreign Office at Bismarck’s request to inform Hatzfeldt; also Holstein to the ambassadors in Rome and Vienna, 7 February 1888; and Herbert Bismarck to the ambassador in London, 28 April 1888. See also Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860–1914* (London, 1980), p. 197.

3

Wilhelm's Naval Dreams

The accession of Wilhelm II on 15 June 1888 marks the end of the decline of the German navy, relative to that of the major Continental powers against which Caprivi had considered its ambitious if rather desperate use. This decline had been accompanied by confusion about the strategic purposes of the navy and about corresponding ship construction.

Wilhelm II undoubtedly provided significant stimulus for German naval construction. Hallmann has entitled a chapter "The naval passion of the young Kaiser,"¹ and sees him as dominating "the construction policy of the naval administration until the first fleet law."² On the other hand, Eckart Kehr scathingly remarks: "The fleet preference of Wilhelm II reflected no insight into either the political or economic necessities of overseas power politics, but was mere games-playing. He handled the fleet question from the viewpoint of a lieutenant."³ His childhood interest in ships and naval matters had been encouraged by his parents. During his visits to England he had visited English dockyards and inspected Nelson's flagship, *Victory*. English naval power greatly fascinated him and he was extremely proud when, in 1889, his grandmother Queen Victoria named him admiral of the British fleet, an appointment which he considered more than honorary. A former Director of British Naval Construction, Sir Edward Reed, once questioned whether any other admiral in the British navy was as "well informed concerning the most trivial detail of a ship or its machinery as the head of the German navy."⁴ In his youth Wilhelm read naval history, particularly the six-volume naval history of Great Britain by William James. He was to remain an enthusiastic ship-designer, although it is alleged that one of the ships he designed would have sunk immediately if launched.⁵ A close personal link with the German navy was forged when with his parents' approval his brother Heinrich entered it. At the time of his accession to the throne Wilhelm announced: "The Navy knows that it has not only filled me with great joy to belong to it through an external bond, but since my earliest youth in full agreement with my dear brother, Prince Heinrich of Prussia, I have a warm and vital interest in it."⁶ In his memoirs Wilhelm remarks that it was when he briefly served in the Foreign Office in 1886 and was instructed about commercial policy and colonies that he "became aware of our dependence on England because we lacked a fleet and Heligoland was in English hands."⁷

Upon ascending to the throne, claims Wilhelm, he "immediately took in hand the building and reform, yes, one can say building anew, of the

German fleet on the basis of preliminary studies in England and at home. That did not suit the competent but somewhat obstinate general [Caprivi] who was not entirely free of vanity.”⁸ Caprivi’s departure was the first sign of Wilhelm’s active naval interest. As Caprivi wrote to Tirpitz: “It was clear to me that I would not be adequate to the young Kaiser with his sailor-like passion.”⁹ And Tirpitz maintained: “The basic reason for Caprivi’s departure was that the Kaiser wanted to split up the powers of the Admiralty so that he might better be able to interfere personally.”¹⁰ Bismarck approved, for he had found the Admiralty too powerful.¹¹ Caprivi was succeeded by an admiral, Count Anton Monts, whose task was to preside over the dissolution of his office. A special committee recommended a division of the powers of the Admiralty between the High Command of the Navy (Oberkommando der Marine) and the Imperial Naval Office (Reichs-Marine-Amt). Accordingly Wilhelm ordered on 30 March 1889:

- (1) The High Command of the Navy will as of 1 April of this year be separated from the administration thereof and will be directed by the commanding admiral named by me according to my instructions. His duties and rights correspond to those of a commanding general of the army.
- (2) The administration of the navy will be directed under the responsibility of the Imperial Chancellor by the Secretary of State of the Imperial Naval Office with the powers of a higher imperial agency.¹²

Two days earlier Wilhelm had decreed that “for 1 April of the current year a special Cabinet for naval matters be set up for me and report to me in the future in these matters to the same extent as until now has been done by the Chief of my Military Cabinet.”¹³

The obvious parallel was the organization of the army. The High Command, which comprised the total of the *Kommandogewalt* of the Emperor, including operational planning, was stronger than the Great General Staff or the Imperial Naval Office. It was deliberately broken up in 1899 at Tirpitz’s behest, who wanted to make his agency, the Imperial Naval Office, which after 1889 was limited to “administrative tasks and parliamentary representation of naval needs,”¹⁴ the dominant naval institution. The Naval Cabinet was in charge of personnel issues. Its chief, by virtue of his office, was in close contact with the Emperor and often played a decisive role, particularly when the other two agencies disagreed.

Bernhardt von Bülow was to maintain: “What Wilhelm I accomplished for the army, he [Wilhelm II] wanted to achieve for the navy. While Wilhelm I succeeded in the unification of Germany, Wilhelm II wanted to found German naval importance [*Seegeltung*] and thereby German world position.”¹⁵ Wilhelm admired his grandfather greatly, suggested that in the Middle Ages he might have been canonized, and tried to emulate him. When encountering parliamentary obstacles to his naval ambitions in the 1890s, it is natural that he thought of comparisons between his own situation and that of his grandfather during his struggle with the Prussian