Indolent Companions:
The German Naval Mutinies of the First World War

Robert R. MacGregor
Rice University
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1 Introduction

By November 1918, the Great War had taken a huge toll on a war-weary German populace. The ruthless rule of Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg had already led to massive strikes across Germany in January of 1918 and the outlook of the German forces on the Western front was steadily diminishing as fresh American troops arrived. Discontent and a radicalization of the masses were widespread; revolution was imminent. On the dull, overcast morning of October 30th, sailors in the High Seas Fleet stationed at Wilhelmshaven took control of the battleship Thüringen, but were overrun by marines from neighboring U-135 soon thereafter.\(^1\) However, the floodgates had been opened. Bolstered by the preceding events at Wilhelmshaven, on November 4th a crowd of sailors and workers gathered in Kiel, overthrowing their officers and establishing sailors’ councils (Soldatenbund) in the pattern of the Bolshevik Soviets (see Figure 4, Appendix B). The stage was set for a country-wide revolution, and with the news of the sailors’ mutinies quickly spreading, demonstrations rapidly broke out in major German cities (see Figure 2, Appendix B). On November 9th the Kaiser abdicated and on November 11th the armistice with the Allied Powers was signed.

While the country as a whole was indeed ripe for revolution, what had caused the dramatic events at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven to transpire? What was unique about the sailors’ situation in the High Seas Fleet that caused the

\(^{1}\)David Woodward, “Mutiny at Wilhelmshaven, 1918”, History Today 18 (1968), no. 11, 782-783.
revolution to begin? The reasons are threefold: a deep-seated dichotomy or “caste-spirit” (*Kastergeist*) between officers and enlisted men after Tirpitz’s “reforms”, disquietude among sailors due to the combination of inactivity of the Navy during the war and low food rations, and ample opportunities for the sailors to organize.

2 The Tirpitz Years and the Beginnings of Unrest (1898-1913)

The German Navy was founded amidst a jubilant sense of nationalism during the Revolutions of 1848. Volunteers turned up in droves to join the bluejackets (*Blauen Jungen*). The Navy was to remain a staunch ally of nationalism and imperialism until the establishment of the Weimar Republic. The Navy grew steadily under Generals Albrecht von Stosch and Leo von Caprivi in the period 1877-1888, but it was not until the ascension of Kaiser Wilhelm II to the throne and the subsequent appointment of Prince Max von Bülow as Chancellor and Alfred von Tirpitz as an aid to the Kaiser that the vast German Naval expansion program that so typified the early twentieth century imperialist period began.² Prince von Bülow stressed the importance of the navy in his book *Imperial Germany*:

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The sea has become a more important factor in our national life than at any previous period ... it has become a vital nerve, which we must never lose, if the young German nation, which is still growing vigorously, is to be kept from suddenly lapsing into a decrepit old age.3

The Kaiser’s obsession with the Navy dates to his formative childhood years which included visits to British dockyards, inspections of ships, and a genuine enjoyment of reading naval literature, such as William James’ six-volume *Naval History of Great Britain*.4 Crown Prince Heinrich’s entry into the navy further fueled the Kaiser’s love of sea-power, forcefully displayed in his correspondence with Tsar Nicholas II of Russia during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904:

It would, of course, be much more agreeable for us if the British were wise, and, remembering all this left us alone and in peace. But never will I for a moment recede before unjust threat.5

And so began the famous arms race with Great Britain, culminating in the introduction in 1906 of behemoth battleships more deadly than any the world had yet seen: the Dreadnoughts. German Naval production rapidly increased in the first decade of the twentieth century, with naval expenditures nearly tripling from 1901-1913 (Appendix A).6

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3Baron Beyens, *Germany Before the War*, (Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., March 1916), 131.
4Lambi, 31.
The purpose of the Tirpitz plan for naval expansionism was twofold. First, Tirpitz wished to secure for Germany a “place in the sun,” i.e., to secure colonial acquisitions abroad. This doctrine of expansionism, which came to be known as Weltpolitik, was an abrupt departure from Bismarck’s famous words: “my map of Africa lies in Europe.” Following the Social Darwinism theory beloved by Tirpitz, expansionism necessitated conflict with Great Britain. As such, Tirpitz advocated a “risk-theory,” i.e., that “the navy was to be no stronger than was necessary to make an aggressor think twice about attacking Germany.” The Kaiser and his advisors also carried the illusory dream that a powerful High Seas Fleet would force Britain into an alliance with Germany.

Simultaneously, under the facade of expansionism ran a deep-rooted plan to maintain aristocratic power in Germany through subversion of the Reichstag by naval expansion. This is made clear through the skillful use of nationalistic feelings among liberals by Tirpitz to secure passage of the five Navy Laws between 1898 and 1908. During the South African War in 1899, the seizure of a German mail-boat by the British was exploited by Tirpitz, as was the popular outrage after the Algeciras Conference of 1906. The Navy Laws specifically called for automatic replacements of battleships after

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9 Fischer, 449.
10 Beyens, 133.
twenty-five years, thus diluting the “power of the purse,” which the Reichstag relied upon as its main source of political power. This “iron law” (Älternat) was designed specifically to undermine the power of the Social Democrats in the Reichstag.

The Tirpitz plan’s ultimate demise was brought about by Britain’s own actions. Rapid dreadnought production in Britain necessitated ever increasing naval expenditures in Germany, which the Reichstag could not accommodate due to the limitations imposed by the federal system, i.e., its inherent inability to directly levy taxes on the German population. Combined with Britain’s timely alliances with France, Russia, and Japan, Germany came to feel encircled.11

The Tirpitz program’s reinforcement of conservative principles had a profound effect upon the social make-up of the navy, creating a dichotomy that would contribute directly to the mutinies of 1917 and 1918. The navy had traditionally heavily recruited from the middle classes; Tirpitz himself being raised in a bourgeoisie family. But after 1898, the officer corps became much more exclusionary, going so far as to demand admission candidates to pass the entrance requirements for the Prussian army.12 The expansion of the navy forced recruitment from the heavily-populated cities, as did the rising need for trained machinists and technicians. These new sailors were class-conscious, already being familiar with socialist ideas unlike the fishermen-

11FISCHER, 452.
turned-sailors of the 19th century. Thus began the *Kastergeist* between the officer corps and the enlisted men that would continue to escalate throughout the decade and into the war.

### 3 Tensions Build: The Great War (1914-1917)

The outbreak of war in August 1914 was met with jubilation throughout Germany (and indeed, all of Europe) that was strongly echoed in the steel hulls of the German High Seas Fleet. The “peace of the fortress” (*Burgfrieden*) in German politics saw the voluntary dissolution of the Reichstag to ensure military victory by preventing internal division, lasting until conditions severely worsened resulting in the Peace Resolution of 1917.

Due to the failure of Tirpitz’s plan to produce a navy strong enough to tackle Britain’s Grand Fleet head-on, German planning returned to an army-centric strategy. The Schlieffen Plan (which had existed for more than a decade in some form) was adopted by General Helmuth von Moltke as the basis for the German war plan. As there existed a “short war illusion” in the German high command, naval operations were to serve only an auxiliary role in a fast land-based campaign similar to the Franco-Prussian War of 1871. The complete blockade of Germany was established soon after war broke out, and the German Navy remained constricted to the ports of Kiel, Wilhelmshaven, and the surrounding Helgoland Bight. A. J. Balfour, First Lord of the Admiralty, remarked in a letter in July 1915:
The truth is that the German High Sea Fleet has so far done nothing, and probably has not been in a position to do anything ... the design has completely failed.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus the German Navy was beaten “as completely as if it had suffered a defeat as decisive as Trafalgar.”\textsuperscript{14}

This inactivity had an immediate drain on the morale on the big ships. Torpedo boats, destroyers, and submarines remained active throughout the war carrying on minesweeping and escorting duties, and even though they “had endured infinitely more danger and more hardship, went through the mutinies without any trouble,” clearly showing the adverse effect of idle time on morale.\textsuperscript{15} The only punctuated period of activity for the High Seas Fleet was the brief Battle of Jütland in May, 1916. The battle was greeted with zeal, as illustrated in the diary of seaman Richard Stumpf aboard the Helgoland:

\begin{quote}
At last the momentous event which for twenty-two months has been the object of our longings, emotions, and thoughts has arrived.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

This inactivity combined with a steady decrease in the quality and quantity of rations aboard the big ships. During the potato blight of 1916-1917,

\textsuperscript{13}A. J. Balfour, \textit{The Navy and the War}, (Darling and Son, Ltd., 1915), 3.
\textsuperscript{15}David Woodward, “Mutiny at Kiel, 1918”, \textit{History Today} 18 (1968), no. 12, 834.
sailors were served a thin soup for most meals which became affectionately known as “chopped barbed-wire” (*Drahtverhau*). The meager rations the sailors received, while apparently comparable to those of civilians, could not be supplemented by black market goods as was common in the cities. Stumpf comments:

> Since it is impossible to keep thinking about the war all the time, our petty problems have risen to the forefront again. We spend most of our time worrying about our bellies.

Officers, however, refused to divert from a “stubborn maintenance of unequal rations” from entirely separate kitchens, thus exacerbating the *Kastergeist* between officers and enlisted men. The officer corps continued to demean petty officers and enlisted men, going so far as to refuse leave even for the death of family members. The high demands placed on the officers on smaller ships resulted in a large fraction of the competent, middle-aged officers to be assigned to duty there. The officers on the big ships were either “too old or too young to deal with the discontent among the ratings.”

The daily calisthenics that had been a welcome routine (see Figure 1, Appendix B) were sharply reduced during the “turnip winter” of 1916-1917 due to further curtailment of rations of the sailors, thereby giving the sailors

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17 Horn, Naval Mutinies, 42.
18 Horn, Diary of Richard Stumpf, 173.
19 Horn, Naval Mutinies, 39-43.
20 Ibid., 34.
more free time to reflect upon their grievances. Thus, the inactivity of the Navy and poor rations constituted a sustained assault upon the morale of the sailors that would lead to a revolutionary level of unrest.

4 The Mutinies: Political Organization (1917-1918)

As the days passed for the starving, unoccupied sailors of the High Seas Fleet unrest mounted. Many sailors began to speak of a negotiated armistice with the Allied Powers. Max Reichspeitch, one of the leaders of the 1917 mutiny, utilized the desire for peace to enroll sailors into the newly formed USPD.\textsuperscript{22} Many sailors supported the July 17 Reichstag Peace Resolution which proclaimed:

‘We are not impelled by the lust of conquest’ ... The Reichstag strives for a peace of understanding and a lasting reconciliation of peoples.\textsuperscript{23}

The conservative-minded officers, however, remained staunchly supportive of the war effort. In an attempt to rekindle a sense of nationalism in their men, a program of daily exposure to pro-war indoctrination (\textit{Vaterländischer Unterricht}) was begun, although it was shrugged off as ridiculously foolish

\textsuperscript{22}Horn, Naval Mutinies, 115.

\textsuperscript{23}Matthias Erzberger, \textit{German Reichstag Peace Resolution}, 1917 (URL: \url{http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/reichstagpeaceresolution.htm}).
propaganda by the sailors. Disagreement on war aims became a major divisive force between officers and enlisted men.

Opposition to the political organization of sailors grew to the point of complete prohibition by Admiral Bachmann in May, 1917 of all political meetings (of any affiliation) without special prior approval.24 Additionally, a heated controversy over the establishment of sailors’ food complaint committees (Menagekommission) began. Secretary of the Navy Capelle ordered the establishment of such committees in 1917, a proposal which was met with hostility among naval officers. This was best exemplified by Prince Heinrich’s outright refusal to implement Capelle’s plan, threatening consulting the Kaiser, his brother, if Capelle did not rescind the order.

Escalation of activities by the sailors began on June 6, when sailors aboard the Prinzregent Luitpold went on hunger strike in protest of extraordinarily bad rations. The strike was quickly resolved as the officer in command capitulated and ordered a more substantial meal for the men.25 Emboldened by their success, the men proceeded to form a sailors’ council (Soldatenbund) to press for more reforms. Soon after, a coaling strike ensured the formation of the promised Menagekommission. Hearing of these victories, men aboard other ships, most notably the flagship Friedrich der Grosse (see Figure 3, Appendix B), carried out similar strikes.

It at first seems peculiar that such actions by the sailors’ would be so

24 Horn, Naval Mutinies, 73.
lightly regarded by the officers. However, the officers themselves faced punish-
ishment if their men showed insubordination, and so they had a vested in-
terest in resolving such disputes with as little fanfare as possible.26

These events escalated, until in August of 1917, another strike on the
Prinzregent Luitpold (due to cancellation of a movie viewing) was labeled
a mutiny. It is important to note that the character of these actions was
much more akin to a strike than a mutiny. The sailors, in the spirit of trade
unionism, were concerned with small, tangible improvements in their daily
lives, not lofty political ideals. This is elucidated by the sailors voluntary
return to their ships in all cases within three to six hours, which was the
required notification time before a ship could set sail, therefore the sailors
ensured their actions would not impair the military readiness of the navy.27
There was no intrinsic distinction between the “mutiny” of August and the
“strikes” of July. In any case, the “mutiny” was met with harsh punishment
by Admiral Scheer; dozens of men were court-martialed and nine were slated
for execution (all but two of these sentences were later commuted).28

The combination of lax regulation by officers of the sailors during their
free time and a desire to gain small concessions resulted in actions by the
sailors that were inherently chaotic and spontaneous in nature. This stands
in stark contrast to the general attitude of politicians and historians shortly
after the war that the USPD had organized the revolution, thereby “stab-

26Ibid., 109.
27WOODWARD, Collapse of Power, 76-77.
28Ibid., 76.
bouncing” Germany in the back. Indeed, this was merely saber-rattling on the part of the conservatives to try and undermine the socialist government by implicating them as the reason for Germany’s defeat.

The unrest among sailors settled into a dull roar for several months following the August 1917 mutiny. The response by Admiral Scheer, which included reforms such as establishing games for the crews in addition to the punishments, proved to be well executed and insured that such an action would not be repeated. It was not until November 1918 that a mutiny would occur again, and the circumstances causing it were quite different.

As the war effort dwindled down, Ludendorff and Hindenburg realized a German victory was impossible. Consequently, with the Kaiser they deposed of Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg during the controversy over the Peace Resolution and installed George Michaelis as his successor on the platform of a negotiated peace. President Wilson’s demand for a cessation of unrestricted submarine warfare before negotiations could commence was agreed to by the new Chancellor, with U-boat operations halting in October.

Fearful of the ascension of an SPD-led government, officers in the Navy plotted a major surface offensive against the British, larger even than Jütland. By choosing not to inform the government of their plans, this constituted “a deliberate attempt to sabotage the armistice negotiations” on the part of the navy high command.29 Rear Admiral von Trotha remarked (seemingly foreshadowing the “stab in the back” legend):

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29 Woodward, History Today 1968, 780.
The thought that the fleet might be brought to inner destruction without a fight is terribly shameful. An attack made in order that we might go under with honour would also be rewarding as we could do severe damage to the English.\(^{30}\)

The mutinies of 1918, beginning on the battleship *Thürigen*, were a counter-revolution to this suicide mission, culminating in a confrontation on Schillig Wharf in Kiel.\(^{31}\) The sailors then moved in on the town of Kiel, everywhere hoisting the red flag of communism. Vice-Admiral Wilhelm Souchon, Governor of Kiel requested soldiers from Hamburg to regain control of the town. The soldiers, arriving by train, were “met by crowds of sailors ... vociferously as comrades.”\(^{32}\) The revolution spread quickly thereafter throughout Germany.

The combination of class-tension with the officers, poor food rations, and uncharacteristically lenient regulation of sailors’ strikes produced a radicalization of the sailors in the High Seas Fleet that led naturally to the mutinies of 1917, aimed at small gains in the sailors’ living conditions. These factors made the High Seas Fleet particularly volatile and susceptible to a real revolution, but it was not until the decision to commit to a large, suicidal surface battle that the sailors’ launched the revolt that would mark the fall of Imperial Germany.

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\(^{30}\)Ibid.


\(^{32}\)Woodward, History Today 1968, 833.
# Appendix A: Naval Buildup Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Naval Expenditures (£) (Britain)</th>
<th>Total Naval Expenditures (£) (Germany)</th>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>34,872,299</td>
<td>9,530,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>34,599,541</td>
<td>12,005,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>1913 (estimated)</td>
<td>47,021,636</td>
<td>22,876,675</td>
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Table 1: Growth of Britain and Germany’s Naval Expenditures  
Hurd and Castle, 376-377

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Battleships (Britain)</th>
<th>Battleships (Germany)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897-1906</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906-1913 (Dreadnought Period)</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Growth of Britain and Germany’s Battleship Fleets  
ibid., 374
Figure 1: German sailors doing calisthenics. 
HORN, Diary of Richard Stumpf, center images
Figure 2: Sites of major revolutionary activity over five days. Note the spread from Kiel and Wilhelmshaven.

HAFFNER, 67
Figure 3: German flagship *Friedrich der Grosse*
*HORN, Diary of Richard Stumpf, center images*

Figure 4: German sailors on protest at Wilhemshaven, 1918
*ibid.*
References


