

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 39

“You Are All Wrong”

Transcript

[music: fanfare]

On April 8, 1904, Liberal MP David Lloyd George visited the former Liberal Prime Minister and current curmudgeon, Lord Rosebery. The Entente Cordiale had been announced that very day, and Rosebery greeted Lloyd George by saying, “Well, I suppose you are just as pleased as the rest of them with this French agreement?”

Lloyd George assured him that he was.

Rosebery replied, “You are all wrong. It will mean war with Germany in the end.”

Welcome to the History of the Twentieth Century.

[music: opening theme]

Episode 39. You Are All Wrong.

When we discussed the diplomatic developments leading to the Entente Cordiale, I mentioned that French diplomats saw an opening when they noticed the British public’s hostility toward Germany during the 1902 Venezuela crisis. Today I want to look at the international consequences of the entente, but first I think we should circle back and talk about how we got to this place, where public opinion and a good bit of official opinion in Britain is growing increasingly hostile to Germany. To tell that story, I need to introduce you to Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz.

Alfred Peter Friedrich Tirpitz was born in 1849 in what was then Prussia and is today Poland. He was the son of a lawyer who enlisted as a naval cadet in the Prussian navy when he was 16 years old, because that’s what his best friend did, and when you’re sixteen, that’s what you do. Follow your best friend.

He made a career of the navy, first the Prussian navy, and then the Imperial German Navy. Strangely enough, he doesn’t seem to have been a romantic about the sea, like many naval men. Later in life, he owned a house in the Black Forest, and would retire there for his vacations, or when he needed some quiet time to plan the future of the German Navy.

It is said that he first came to the attention of the Kaiser, Wilhelm II, at a dinner for senior naval officers. The Kaiser went around the table and asked each officer to give his recommendation on the future of the navy. When it was Tirpitz's turn, he told the Kaiser that what the navy needed was battleships.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, battleships were the ultimate measure of the strength of a country's navy, as well as the ultimate national status symbol. So we should take a minute here to examine battleships, starting with the question of what exactly a battleship is, since the word can mean very different sorts of ships, depending on what period we're talking about. So let's consider what the word means to Alfred Tirpitz, when he said it in the 1890s.

The story of the battleship begins in 1827, with the invention of explosive shells. Before that time, naval combat mostly consisted of firing solid metal cannonballs at wooden ships, in the hopes that the ball might punch a hole through the hull and allow water to get in and sink the ship, or that the heavy metal ball rattling around inside the enemy ship would do enough damage to cripple her.

That changed when the cannonballs became shells and started exploding. This spelled the end of the wooden-hulled warship. From now on, ships would need armor plating. Later in the century, coal-fired steam ships replaced sailing ships, and by the 1890s, battleships—of the pre-dreadnought variety—became established. These are the ships that we have seen fight in the Russo-Japanese War.

The number of battleships that a country's navy possessed was regarded as the most important measure of that nation's naval power. Heck, it was regarded as the *only* measure of that nation's naval power. And after the publication of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* by Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1890—remember that?—it became generally accepted by the militaries of all the major powers that any nation with aspirations of becoming a world power needed battleships. World powers were ranked by the number of battleships they had in the same way that, decades later, world powers would be ranked by the number of nuclear weapons they held.

But strategic nuclear weapons, built to level whole cities, would never have about them the same air of romance that battleships had. Civilians with no military background took up the study of battleships as a hobby. Take, for example, John Frederick Thomas Jane, a British vicar's son who sketched warships as a hobby. In 1898, Jane published *All the World's Fighting Ships*, a book full of information, photographs, and sketches of all the world's warships. Updated editions of what later came to be called *Jane's Fighting Ships* have been published regularly ever since, and are still being published today.

People built—and still build—scale models of battleships. People played wargames, with model ships on the floor, or with paper or cardboard counters on a tabletop. There were, and probably still are, amateur battleship designers, who sketch out whole navies on sheaves of paper. Among

the amateur battleship designers of the early twentieth century, you have to include names like Kaiser Wilhelm II, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Back in episode 36, a few weeks ago, when I talked about lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War, I discussed battleships of this period in the context of critiquing their design. But today, we're talking about them in the era before the war revealed their shortcomings. You'll recall that the naval doctrine of the time called for a mix of guns of different sizes, but at the upper end of that range, you had 12-inch naval guns, guns that could fire shells ten miles or more. These shells weighed 800 pounds each, as heavy as the proverbial 800-pound gorilla. (Actually, the average male gorilla only weighs about 400 pounds, so go figure.) But the point is, these guns were the largest naval guns ever built, and they made battleships the most feared ships in any navy that had them.

I mentioned that one of the people caught up in the romance of the battleship was Kaiser Wilhelm II. When Tirpitz told the Kaiser that the Navy needed battleships, well, this was exactly what the Kaiser wanted to hear, and in Imperial Germany, no one's career ever suffered much for telling the Kaiser exactly what he wanted to hear. Wilhelm assigned Tirpitz to a new position in Berlin where he could draw up strategy for the future development of the German Navy.

Um, German Navy? Whoever even heard of the German Navy? Germany, like Prussia before it, didn't have much of a naval tradition. During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, for all of Prussia's amazing victories on land, the Prussian Navy spent the war in port, hiding from the much larger French navy.

Kaiser Wilhelm had much more power to direct government policy than did, say, his uncle, King Edward VII in Britain, but the budget still had to go through the Reichstag, and there wasn't much of a political constituency for the navy, so the growth of the German Navy was rather *ad hoc* in the nineteenth century. The government would ask the Reichstag for funding for a new cruiser this year, or maybe a squadron of torpedo boats next year, or whatever, depending on how much money was in the Treasury, and whatever else might be going on. And of course, there were the Social Democrats, who didn't like military spending, or Kaiser Wilhelm, very much at all, and suspected that naval expenditures only existed to give the Kaiser an excuse to dress up in his favorite sailor suits.

Now, I mentioned cruisers and torpedo boats just now, so I suppose I should take a moment and review what they are. Cruisers are mid-sized ships, larger than torpedo boats or destroyers, but smaller than battleships. The idea behind cruisers is that in times of war they would patrol individually over long distances, hence the name "cruiser," mostly to raid enemy commerce or protect friendly commerce by escorting or scouting out threats.

We talked a little about torpedo boats when we looked at the Hague peace conference of 1899. Torpedoes had been invented in 1866, and are getting better all the time. By the 1890s, some naval planners are beginning to think that the torpedo might be the Achilles heel of the

battleship. As early as the late 1870s, navies began experimenting with small, fast boats—torpedo boats—that just might be able to zip into close range of a battleship, too fast and too small for the bigger ship to hit with its guns, launch a few torpedoes, and then zip away again. One good hit from a torpedo could very well sink a battleship of this period, and some wondered if battleships were on the verge of becoming obsolete. The situation looked even worse once navies started experimenting with torpedo boats that could submerge and approach an enemy underwater, invisibly. In other words, what we now call submarines.

One response of naval planners was to design a smaller, faster ship that could be produced in quantity to screen the battleships and attack torpedo boats before they got close enough to be a threat. These ships were called torpedo boat destroyers, but soon became known as simply “destroyers.”

If you understand battleships, cruisers, destroyers, torpedo boats, and submarines, then you know everything you need to know to understand early twentieth century navies. The key to understanding the roles of these different ships lies in their “rock-paper-scissors” relationship to each other. Cruisers and especially battleships can easily defeat destroyers, destroyers are designed to sink torpedo boats and submarines, while torpedo boats and submarines are designed to ambush battleships and cruisers.

The prevailing naval strategy in Germany in the late nineteenth century was to use cruisers to patrol the oceans across the world, as befits a country with a rising colonial empire. But Tirpitz disagreed. He felt Germany lacked the worldwide network of coaling stations that would be needed to support such a strategy. He also believed that so long as Britain had its powerful Home Fleet, geography dictated that any far-flung German navy was in danger of getting cut off from home.

So Tirpitz recommended battleships. A lot of them, in squadrons of eight. His initial plan was two squadrons of eight, plus a flagship and two reserve ships, or nineteen in all. And all of this was directed against Britain. Now, Tirpitz, unlike many other German military officers, had no particular animus toward Great Britain, but he saw the Royal Navy as the largest naval threat to Germany. Britain would always have a large naval force in its home waters, which would make a blockade or even an invasion of the German coast always a threat.

Tirpitz did not believe that Germany could ever beat Britain in a naval arms race. But he didn't believe that Germany needed to. All Germany needed to do, Tirpitz argued, was to have a large enough navy to deter the British from naval conflict with Germany. Britain had a far-flung Empire, so a lot of its ships would be needed elsewhere. Britain also had France and Russia as rivals, two other countries with large navies. In Tirpitz's view, Britain simply would not be able to afford a naval war with a strong German navy, because even if Britain won, its own losses would be so serious as to cost it the ability to patrol far-off corners of the world and would make it vulnerable to French or Russian intervention.

And then there was the question of blockades. In the event of war, the Royal Navy might be expected to blockade German ports. Up until this time, blockading a port meant keeping a hostile naval force within sight of the harbor, so that you could intercept any ships that attempt to enter or leave. This meant the British would have to divide their fleet into battle groups for each German port. A strong German fleet could then prey on these small groups one at a time, since it would have local superiority, even if the British had a larger fleet overall. That was the theory, anyway.

At first, there was little enthusiasm for Tirpitz's plan in the German government. Most everyone figured there was no way the Reichstag would ever agree to fund the massive program of ship construction Tirpitz was proposing. In 1895, a frustrated Tirpitz asked to be reassigned. He was sent to command the German East Asia squadron. At that time, the German East Asia squadron was based in Hong Kong, which, of course, required the goodwill of the British. Tirpitz began scouting at once for a better base, and began eyeing Tsingtao, on the Shandong Peninsula of China. As you may recall, two German missionaries were murdered on the Shandong Peninsula in 1897, which led to German occupation of Tsingtao, which led to China being forced to grant Germany a 99-year lease on Tsingtao. So the German East Asia squadron got exactly the base Tirpitz wanted for it.

Of course, he got his base at the cost of triggering a scramble for China among the great powers, and then the Boxer Uprising. So Tirpitz's narrow focus on a better base for the German Navy in the Far East had huge negative international consequences that Tirpitz never gave any thought to. Do you think there's any danger that might happen again?

In 1898, Tirpitz was summoned back to Germany and made State Secretary of the Imperial Navy. Instead of the usual year-by-year haggling with the Reichstag, Tirpitz drafted and presented a naval bill that would authorize the construction of his 19-battleship navy over a period of years. Along with the bill came a public relations blitz. A Navy League was formed to work up popular support for a large German navy. The Navy sent its torpedo boats up the Rhine to make public appearances and stir up interest. Ship launchings became elaborate affairs where the Kaiser would come dressed up in his admiral uniform and make a speech—which he loved doing. Businesses like Krupp and the Hamburg-Amerika line, that stood to make money from naval construction, were urged to lobby the Reichstag. The Kaiser and the Chancellor, von Bülow, and Tirpitz himself lobbied the Reichstag extensively. Tirpitz got his navy, and the Kaiser ennobled him, making him Admiral *von* Tirpitz.

In 1900, capitalizing on German hostility toward Britain as the Boer war was unfolding in South Africa, Tirpitz got a second naval bill through the Reichstag, this one doubling the German Navy to 38 battleships.

But just as Tirpitz did not consider the geopolitical consequences of Germany acquiring a base in China, he seems not to have asked himself what the British response to his two naval bills might be.

The British response was to have a freak out. Every Briton was taught that Britannia needed to rule the waves, so that Britons never, ever would be slaves. Britain is heavily dependent on sea trade, and a powerful foreign navy just hours from the British coast is like having a knife against your throat. A future British politician will describe Britain as an island of coal surrounded by fish. Which is pretty much is the British economy in a nutshell, although in fairness I should add that they have a lot of sheep, too.

Britain's coal drove its industrial revolution, but the raw materials, from the iron ore to make steel to the cotton fibers to make textiles, all that had to be imported. And you can't expect the citizens of the richest country in the world to live on mutton and whitefish, which is why at the beginning of the twentieth century, Britain imports 60% of its food. A hostile German fleet capable of cutting Britain's lifeline?

Not gonna happen. Not if the British have anything to say about it.

[music: "Rule, Britannia!"]

The combination of the ill will spawned by the Boer War, the collapse of Joseph Chamberlain's efforts to forge an alliance, Tirpitz's two naval bills, and Kaiser Wilhelm's general intemperate blustering meant that by 1902, relations between Britain and Germany were getting distinctly chilly. Public opinion in Britain grew hostile, and Germany replaced Russia as the bad guy in British invasion novels.

Things only got worse once those new German battleships launched. A battleship only has so much space inside it. How you allocate that space between engines for speed, and armor for protection, and guns for attack, and bunkers for coal and quarters and amenities for the crew says a lot about how you expect to use your new battleships. British battleships had large coal bunkers for long tours of duty and plenty of space for the crew and refrigerated chambers for storing food for a long voyage. German battleships, by contrast, had great armor, guns, and engines, but at the cost of smaller coal bunkers and limited crew accommodations. German battleship crews slept on land, and they ate canned food when they were aboard their ships, thank you very much.

It was almost as if the Germans were designing a fleet of ships that would only be useful within a radius of a few hours from their home ports. You don't have to be the greatest British naval genius of your generation to figure out what that is suggesting.

As it happens, the greatest British naval genius of that generation was already hard at work designing Britain's response to this new threat, but that is a story for a future episode. In April, 1904, as I said, the Entente Cordiale between France and Britain was announced. At first, the

German government took this news calmly. Chancellor Bülow told the Kaiser that the Entente was only a set of colonial agreements, and really meant nothing as far as the balance of power in Europe went.

In fact, the country whose leaders took the news the hardest was Russia. Remember that when the Entente was announced, Russia was three months into a war with Japan, a British ally. The Japanese had launched a surprise attack on Port Arthur, which was now under blockade. As the war progressed, and the Japanese kept winning, and the Russians kept losing, it was tempting for members of the Russian court to blame their nation's setbacks on secret British support for the Japanese. Emperor Nikolai and his closest advisors began calling the British "Jews" in their private talks about the war. And in the Imperial Russian vocabulary, that's a pretty stiff insult. And then there was Britain's entente with France. To the Russian Emperor and his government, the Entente looked suspiciously like a British diplomatic effort to aid Japan by prying away Russia's most important ally, France. The French, as we saw, were very reluctant to support Russia in this war, which, again, looked a lot like the British pulling strings from behind the curtain.

And then there was the business in Tibet. As the Russo-Japanese war broke out, the British sent a military force from India into Tibet. British India and Tibet had a boundary dispute, and ostensibly the purpose of this expedition was to establish diplomatic relations and resolve the boundary dispute. Of course, it's an odd way to go about establishing diplomatic relations with your neighbor: I mean, an armed invasion is usually considered a hostile act. The Tibetans considered it a hostile act. The ruler of Tibet, the Dalai Lama, fled the country, and the Tibetans attempted to oppose the British invasion.

But all they had were swords and muskets, and the British easily forced the Tibetans to sign the Treaty of Lhasa, in which Tibet had to pay reparations as punishment for not being able to tell the difference between an invasion, which this totally was not, and an expedition, which is what it totally was. Tibet was also forced to agree not to establish diplomatic relations with any country other than Britain. So in other words, if the rest of the world wants to deal with Tibet, they would have to do it through the British Foreign Office. In other, other words, Britain had made Tibet into a protectorate, and, not coincidentally, a buffer against Russian ambitions in Asia.

The Tibet expedition, seen in the light of the Anglo-Japanese alliance, followed by a Japanese attack, followed by the entente convinced the Russians, if they needed further convincing, that all of these developments were part of a grand British scheme to undermine Russia.

And, speaking of the British, I haven't mentioned Lord Landsdowne yet. He was the British Foreign Secretary at this time. You may recall that when Lord Salisbury was Prime Minister, he had liked to keep the Foreign Secretary job for himself, but after the Khaki Election of 1900, he handed it off to Lord Landsdowne, who kept the job after Arthur Balfour became the PM. Lord

Landsdowne was riding pretty high after the entente with France was announced. He took note of how quickly relations with France had gone from the tensions and acrimony of the Fashoda incident in 1898 to the peaches and cream of the Entente. And all it took, in the end, was for the British and the French to sit down together and hammer out compromises over their outstanding colonial disputes. Hmm. Things were pretty tense between Britain and Russia, and the outstanding issues were largely colonial disputes. Do you suppose there's any basis for an entente between Britain and Russia?

On the plus side, Russia is getting beaten up by the Japanese just now, which will likely leave her feeling less aggressive and more in need of friends. On the minus side, the Russians were suspicious that the British are playing a game, a game where they are officially neutral, but were slyly helping the Japanese behind the scenes.

Lord Landsdowne decided that a little personal diplomacy was in order, and prevailed upon the British King, Edward VII, who was the son of Victoria and therefore uncle to the Russian Empress Alexandra, to use his royal and family connections to the Russian Emperor and Empress to reassure them that Britain was indeed neutral in the war, and harbored no ill will toward Russia. Edward had been effective in charming the French, as you may recall, and maybe he could do it again. The King agreed to this, and spent 1904 writing letters to his niece and nephew and engaging in a little one-on-one time with Russian diplomats. Edward offered to mediate a settlement in the Russo-Japanese war. The Russians quickly rejected this offer, but over time, Edward's diplomacy began to have an effect.

Unfortunately, one of the effects it had was to set the Germans on edge. All these British warm fuzzies being sent Russia's way so soon after the announcement of the entente with France looked suspicious to Kaiser Wilhelm. The Kaiser had had a reasonably good relationship with his grandmother, Queen Victoria, but with her son, King Edward? Not so much. The Kaiser always felt resentment toward Edward, or Uncle Bertie as he was known in the family. Wilhelm had been an Emperor since 1888, and for the first 13 years of his reign, Uncle Bertie was only a crown prince. True, Edward was much older and was Wilhelm's uncle, but in Wilhelm's view, he was the higher-ranking royal and Uncle Bertie had always been looking down on him. Now, with the discovery that King Edward was working to build alliances with France and Russia but not with him, Wilhelm took it as one more snub from an uncle with a long history of snubbing him, and said so in front of other people.

Now, the Kaiser was an avid yachtsman. He frequently went to the Cowes Week regatta at the Isle of Wight in England, and Lord Landsdowne suggested to the King that a visit to that year's Kiel Regatta in Germany, another favorite event of the Kaiser's, might be a good way to mend fences with his nephew.

And so, in June of 1904, King Edward visited Kiel. It was typical of the Kaiser that he harbored grudges and resentment when Uncle Bertie was ignoring him, but as soon as he got his uncle's

attention, he couldn't resist the urge to show off. The Kaiser hosted the King aboard his yacht, the *Hohenzollern*, which had been decked out at great expense for the occasion. And every member of the Kaiser's cabinet was there, as were all the imperial princes.

The King spoke of his desire for peace, and how he wanted nothing more than to resolve outstanding disagreements between Britain and the other major powers. The Kaiser, a staunch supporter of Russia in the war, had to bring up the whole "yellow peril" thing again and explain to his uncle how their mutual relative, Emperor Nikolai, was doing the Lord's work in Asia by protecting Europe from the Asian hordes. Edward replied politely that the Japanese had legitimate grievances with the Russians, and that they were a people as civilized and dignified as any Europeans, the color of their skin notwithstanding.

If that had been the worst moment of the King's visit to Kiel, it wouldn't have been so bad. But the worst was still to come. You see, as soon as the King's visit to Kiel had been scheduled, the German chancellor, von Bülow, and the Navy Secretary, Tirpitz, had begun to worry. Because Kiel is not just home to the Kiel Regatta. It is also the home of the Imperial German Navy.

Both men knew the Kaiser well enough to know at once that he would pull out all the stops to impress his uncle. One stop neither of them wanted the Kaiser to pull out, though, was the Navy. They begged him, they pleaded with him, they extracted promises from him, please, please, please, whatever else you do, do not show off your shiny new navy to the King. Because they knew the German naval buildup was alienating Britain. Jackie Fisher, the Second Lord of the Admiralty, about whom I will have more to say in a couple of weeks, was already giving speeches in Britain, advocating what was called the Copenhagenization of the German Fleet.

This was a reference to 1807, when the British attacked the Danish capital of Copenhagen and seized the Danish Navy, to prevent its being used by Napoleon against Britain. In 1904, Copenhagenization meant what we would call a pre-emptive strike. Fisher was advocating nothing less than a surprise British attack on Kiel, to destroy or capture the Kaiser's new fleet before Germany can use it against the British. Imagine an American or Soviet air force officer advocating a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the other power in 1964. Yeah, kind of like that.

Anyway, given the tensions over the German Navy, the last thing Bülow or Tirpitz wanted was for the Kaiser to put on a big show of his huge and intimidating navy in front of the British King, which would certainly be interpreted in Britain as a threatening gesture.

And so Kaiser Wilhelm exercised his well-known restraint, and kept the Imperial German Navy tied up at its docks and out of sight that day. Ha, ha. I am joking, of course. No, the Kaiser ordered the entire Imperial German Navy, every last ship of it, to pass in review before the King, firing salutes with guns so big they shook the deck of the *Hohenzollern*. In other words, the Kaiser put on a big show of his huge and intimidating navy in front of the British King, which was interpreted in Britain as a threatening gesture.

And so, for scaring the crap out of the British during a visit intended to foster a closer relationship, I would like to present this week's Kaiser Wilhelm II award for making an ass out of yourself to Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Anyway, as far as British diplomacy toward Russia went, whatever was gained in 1904 was lost later in the year after the Dogger Bank incident. You may recall that while the Russian Baltic Fleet was on its epic journey toward destruction in the Tsushima Strait, it attacked British fishing boats in the North Sea, mistaking them for Japanese torpedo boats, because of course they did. The British were angry about their fishing boats being attacked, and fisherman killed, and the Russian Fleet not even, you know, stopping to help or checking in with the Royal Navy or anything.

Kaiser Wilhelm, meanwhile, always looking for opportunities to pit Germany's rivals against each other, told the Russian Emperor that the British were troublemakers, looking for ways to aid Japan against Russia, and that he, Wilhelm, had information that perhaps there really were Japanese torpedo boats hiding among the British fishing ships.

But as 1904 passed into 1905, the German foreign ministry looked around and decided that it saw Germany's European rivals in disarray. True, the entente between Britain and France, though it was officially about ending colonial rivalries, looked increasingly like it was being driven by a mutual loathing for Germany, and when you add in the Franco-Russian alliance, Germans start to feel hemmed in. But on the other hand, the British war machine had been humbled by the Boer War, and the British no longer saw themselves as invincible. French society in general and the French Army in particular were still bleeding from the self-inflicted wounds of the Dreyfus Affair, and Russia was getting its butt handed to it by the Japanese.

And in the middle of all this was a strong and confident Germany. It was almost like the good old days, right after the Franco-Prussian War when everyone deferred to Germany and Bismarck's diplomacy arranged the entire continent to Germany's liking. Perhaps Germany was strong enough to dominate the continent again. In the German foreign ministry, they were readying a plan aimed at isolating the British as thoroughly as Bismarck had isolated France a generation earlier.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week for the History of the Twentieth Century, as we continue the story and find out whether adroit German diplomacy can reshape the European order, or whether Germany will overplay its hand, and merely strengthen the bonds between Britain, France, and Russia. Spoiler alert: it's the second thing. That's next week, on the History of the Twentieth Century.

Oh, and one more thing. When the German Kaiser showed off his navy to King Edward, Edward politely explained to the Kaiser that some in Britain saw the German naval buildup as a threat directed entirely against Britain, either to cut off her commerce and strangle her, or perhaps to spearhead an invasion. He emphasized that he personally did not believe this, of course, but

many in Britain did, and the Royal Navy was likely to build two new ships for every new German ship.

As it turns out, Britain has a surprise in store for Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy, a surprise that will revolutionize naval warfare. But that, again, is a story for another episode.

[music: closing theme]