
Aidan Dodson. *The Kaiser's Battlefleet: German Capital Ships 1871–1918*.
Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2016.

Book Review

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In *The Kaiser's Battlefleet*, Aidan Dodson—an Egyptologist by trade, but also an expert on late nineteenth and early twentieth century naval history—charts the development of the Imperial German Navy's capital ships from the end of the Franco-Prussian War until the end of World War I. During this period, the *Kaiserliche Marine* experienced a meteoric rise from a small coastal defense force to the world's second largest navy, only to then virtually disappear as a fighting force in 1919. Dodson's work is organized into two main parts: the first part, comprising nine chapters arranged chronologically, traces the development of Germany's capital ships from her first ironclad, the British-built *Arminius*, to the last theoretical battleship designs issued as the Second Reich crumbled in 1918. The second part is a detailed, *Jane's Fighting Ships*-style list of the vessels in question, replete with illustrations showing armor layout and general appearance, including modifications, as some of these ships were in service for several decades or more. Appendices listing main armaments, trial performance results, and order of battle are also included. The term "capital ship" in this book encompasses not only those ships classified as *Linienschiffe* (lit. ships of the line, or battleships in English), but also the *Große Kreuzer* (lit. large cruisers, called armoured or battlecruisers in the English-speaking navies), many of which were actually larger than contemporary battleships, and served vital functions as fleet scouts and foreign-station flagships.

The book's main strength is in its ability to place German capital ship development in historical context. This makes *The Kaiser's Battlefleet* more than just a technical encyclopedia of the Second Reich's battleships. While indeed delving into great technical detail, Dodson maintains a sense of perspective throughout the narrative. Of particular relevance is his comparative analysis between German and British naval developments. Germany aspired to rival Great Britain's naval mastery in the period under study and German ships were, by the turn of the century, constructed in anticipation—or in answer—to developments across the North Sea. In its ability to combine a detailed technical chronology, data, and illustrations with context and comparative analysis, *The Kaiser's Battlefleet* will be difficult to match as an English-language source on the Imperial German Navy. It is of particular interest that the book's focus is not only on the

Dreadnought epoch (1906 onward) and World War I (1914–1918), but also the earlier period in Imperial German naval development. This span of thirty years saw the foundation of the Fleet Laws (which set the stage for massive naval expansion) and the rapid development of warships from ironclad, steam-and-sail hybrids into

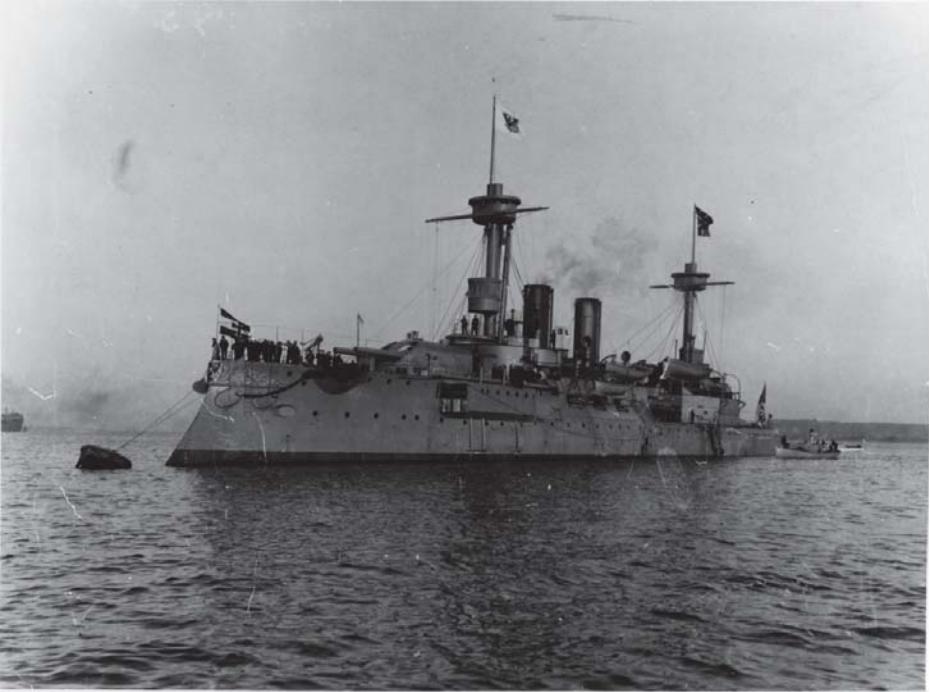


Figure 1. SMS *Brandenburg*, Imperial Germany’s first oceangoing pre-dreadnought battleship. Courtesy of www.history.navy.mil.

turreted, steam-powered battleships.

The Imperial German Navy was created when the German states consolidated into one political entity after Prussia’s victory against France in 1871. In the decades that followed, the navy expanded greatly as naval technology moved at dizzying speed, with ships rendered obsolete by the time they were completed. By 1890, the German Navy had its first oceanic, turreted, steam-powered battleships on the stocks (the *Brandenburg* class), and moved gradually to eclipse the French Navy as the second largest in the world, and to become the Royal Navy’s preeminent rival. The launch of HMS *Dreadnought* in 1906 largely reset the naval arms race as she made all battleships and large cruisers that had gone

before her obsolete. As the two naval rivals frantically set about outbuilding one another in Dreadnoughts and Dreadnought-type large cruisers (battlecruisers), Germany tried to keep up but Britain managed to stay just out of reach. The Dreadnought arms race ultimately soured Anglo-German relations and helped precipitate the outbreak of World War I by isolating Germany politically.

The book makes it clear that German capital ship design gravitated toward a philosophy that prioritized armor protection and rate of fire over gun range and caliber. This was because of fiscal constraints, and in due part to the belief—understandable, but later proven false—that the weather and visibility in the North Sea dictated battles at shorter ranges. The result, from the 1890s onward, was a fleet whose ships possessed firepower inferior to their Royal Navy counterparts, yet also tended to be more resilient. This was especially the case with Germany's later generation of large cruisers (SMS *Von der Tann* onward), illustrated by their ability to withstand more punishment than their British battlecruiser opposites at the Battle of Jutland (31 May–1 June 1916). Nevertheless, the ever more expensive naval arms race with Great Britain soon found Germany on the losing end.

By the start of World War I, Germany possessed a Dreadnought battlefleet that, while second largest in the world, was still numerically inferior to the Royal Navy by a ratio of 1.6 to 1—a margin large enough that it could never hope to challenge the British in an all-out fleet battle. The slight German tactical advantage of better protection was of little help against an enemy who possessed overwhelming firepower superiority. At Jutland, the Germans tried to isolate and destroy a portion of the British Grand Fleet. Although fought with great skill and courage, the ploy failed and the German Navy was never able to repeat the attempt. The last two years of the war saw the imperial battlefleet relegated to a subordinate tactical role, while Germany pinned her hopes on the U-boat arm to knock Britain out of the conflict—effectively turning Mahanian prewar assumptions about naval strategy on their head.

As Dodson indicates in the introduction, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz—considered along with Kaiser Wilhelm II the father of the German Navy—saw the *Kaiserliche Marine* not so much as a weapon for actually fighting the British as a geopolitical instrument to keep Britain from fighting Germany. Tirpitz's prewar "risk theory" (that Britain would not risk war for fear of losing so much of her navy that her control of the seas would be jeopardized) proved in the end a chimera, but that is with the benefit of hindsight. Not unlike nuclear weapons ownership in the post-1945 world, a nation in 1900 could hardly call itself a great power if it did not possess a battleship fleet. Capital ships were instruments of political leverage as much as military tools. Germany, as an ascendant great power

in the early twentieth century, could arguably not, given the values of the time, afford to forego a powerful navy if it wanted to be taken seriously. Whatever the motivator, the baleful consequence of this perceived need for battleships was a

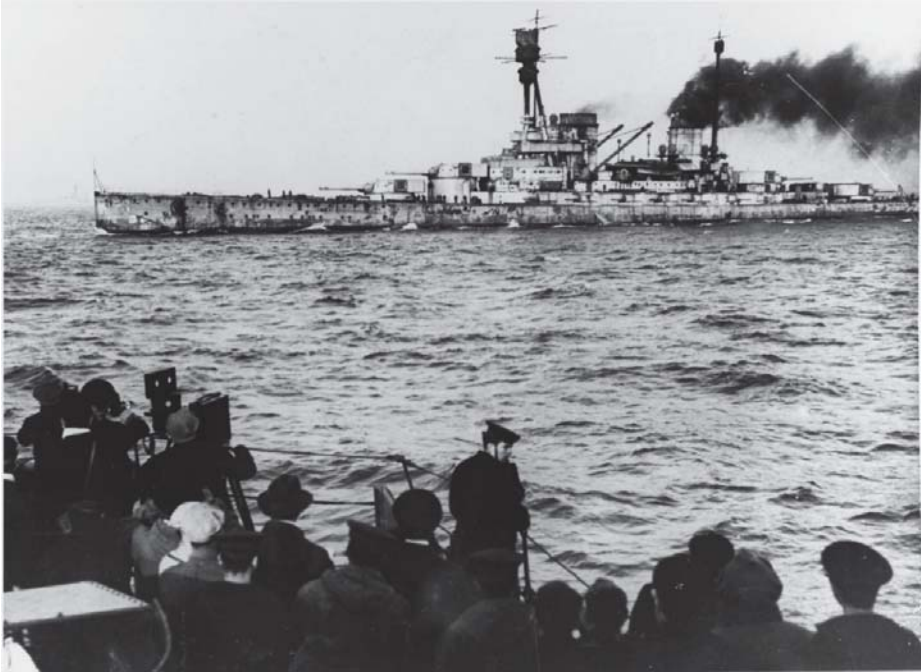


Figure 2. The last of Imperial Germany’s large cruisers, SMS *Hindenburg*, steams into internment in 1918, observed closely by British sailors. Courtesy of www.history.navy.mil.

hideously expensive naval arms race that Germany eventually lost.

Further complicating matters was Wilhelm’s restructuring, in 1899, of naval administration along the lines of the German Army. This decentralized the admiralty into three parts—the Oberkommando (High Command), Reichs-Marine-Amt (Naval Office), and Marine-Kabinett (Naval Cabinet)—leaving the Kaiser with ultimate authority over naval issues. Sole military power in the hands of a single man—one of mercurial temperament and mediocre intellect—did not bode well for the Second Reich. It is reasonable to surmise that the resources lavished on the German battlefleet were better used elsewhere. Nevertheless, instead of adopting the Anglo-centric view that Germany, unlike Britain, had no reason or “right” by its geographic position to build an oceanic navy, Dodson illustrates how the Germans pursued a naval program to rival Britain that in the end failed. It is

necessary to view these circumstances with a balanced perspective through the lens of those who lived it. The fact that Germany's enemies could blockade her into starvation during wartime seemed to be a convincing argument for a powerful battlefleet.

In sum, *The Kaiser's Battlefleet* is a valuable addition to the literature on the Imperial German Navy, its building race with Great Britain, and World War I. Its timing is probably no accident, as the last few years have seen a surge in literature on the Great War and related topics for the centenary. As an English-language text, it complements Gary Staff's monograph on Germany's Dreadnought-type large cruisers, as well as Patrick Kelly's biography of Admiral Tirpitz. The book itself has a nice finish and is comprehensively illustrated. On the other hand, the text is riddled with typos. This reflects poorly on the author, as well as the proofreaders, editors, and publisher. However, these flaws, while irritating, do not detract from the overall narrative, which does a fine job placing German capital ship development in proper historical context. Ultimately, Dodson's book remains a specialist work and, alongside its contextual analysis, has a heavy emphasis on technical data. Thus, it will appeal mostly to naval historians, World War I researchers, wargamers, and dedicated warship buffs.

Notes

1. Aidan Dodson, *The Kaiser's Battlefleet: German Capital Ships 1871–1918* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2016), 22–23, 37–39.

2. *Ibid.*, 45, 79–80.

3. *Ibid.*, 101, 172.

4. *Ibid.*, 7, 51.

5. *Ibid.*, 11, 35–36.

6. Patrick J. Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Gary Staff, *German Battlecruisers of World War One: Their Design, Construction and Operations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014).