

High Seas Fleet

By [Stephan Huck](#)

Summary

In 1898, the German Reich began to build up a strong battle fleet. It was meant to be capable of withstanding a decisive battle against the Royal Navy in the case of war. However, in the end it mainly served as a deterrent. In the second half of the war, uprisings took place in the fleet.

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The Concept of the “Risk Fleet”

During the reign of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#), from 1888 to 1918, [Germany](#) began to build up a strong battle fleet. From 1907, it was called the High Seas Fleet (*Hochseeflotte*). Contrary to what this title suggests, the fleet was primarily intended to be used for operations in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. [Alfred von Tirpitz \(1849-1930\)](#), secretary of state in the *Reichsmarineamt*, developed it as a so called “risk fleet”: the [British fleet](#) was the role model strength wise, as it was the strongest navy of the time. The two aims of appealing to potential allies and deterrence balanced each other out in the conceptualization of the fleet. It was intended that the risk of a sea battle would be too high for [Great Britain](#), and that the strength of the fleet would make Germany an attractive ally for the British.

However, this plan failed. By 1904, Great Britain and [France](#) had formed the Entente Cordiale. In 1907, this alliance was expanded to the Triple Entente. In 1906, the launching of HMS [Dreadnought](#) devaluated the previous German efforts in naval armament. This marked the beginning of a veritable [arms race](#) between the fleets of Great Britain and Germany,

which lasted until the beginning of the First World War. In 1912, Great Britain decided to back away from the concept of a decisive battle in the case of war. Instead, should war come, it would attempt to [blockade](#) the German coast from a distance.

The [naval arms race](#) remains a subject of controversy in historical research: while some focus on German domestic policy and believe that the program aimed to increase economic growth and employment to stabilize the [empire](#), others query whether the British efforts in naval armament, especially those associated with Sir [John Fisher \(1841-1920\)](#), can be reduced to a reaction to German armament, or whether a different logic is to be seen behind these plans.¹

The High Seas Fleet between the Outbreak of the First World War and the Battle of Jutland

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, Great Britain began to realize its [pre-war planning](#). Due to its inferiority in numbers, the High Seas Fleet felt incapable of taking action against the British blockade. Its tasks were limited to [reconnaissance](#) and surveillance in the German Bight. Early [losses](#) also led to the limited operation of the High Seas Fleet. The purpose of the fleet was mainly to act as a deterrent “fleet in being” which bound enemy forces due to its sheer existence, but did not play an active role in the war.

This situation stood in stark contrast to the self-conception of the navy which had been trained solely for decisive battles. Furthermore, it contradicted the expectations of the public which had been subjected to a naval [propaganda](#) campaign about the imperative necessity of the fleet before the war and now had to observe the inactivity of a seemingly useless fleet. Dissatisfaction with this situation became widespread shortly after the outbreak of the war in public opinion as well as in the ships’ crews. Neither the achievements of the cruiser squadrons, which were intensively reported on by German propaganda, nor the victories of the [U-boats](#) or isolated naval operations, like the bombing of British coastal towns in December 1915, were able to change this fundamentally.

The Battle of Jutland

It took until the middle of the war for the scenario of a decisive battle, as imagined before the war, to be seemingly fulfilled with the [Battle of Jutland](#). Off the western coast of the Danish mainland, from 31 May to 1 June, the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet met in a battle that lasted for around twelve hours.

Despite its inferiority in numbers, the High Seas Fleet was able to sink a greater number of British ships than it lost itself. Due to this outcome, the German public regarded the battle as an overwhelming victory at sea.²

On the other hand, the commander-in-chief of the High Seas Fleet had to admit that the Battle of Jutland did not change anything with regard to the strategic dilemma posed by the British blockade. In his immediate report to the *Kaiser* he therefore recommended the resumption of [unrestricted U-boat warfare](#). This constituted an admission of the failure of the conceptual ideas that had once justified the German naval program.

The High Seas Fleet in the Second Half of the War

With the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare in February 1917 and the entry of the [USA](#) into the war as an ally of the Entente two months later, the role of the High Seas Fleet was largely reduced to that of acting as a subsidiary force for the U-boats and securing the German coasts. As a reaction to the initial high losses caused by German U-boats, the British navy developed a convoy system. The German navy experienced some successes against this with cruisers and torpedo boats between [Norway](#) and Scotland in autumn 1917. However, apart from an unsuccessful operation in April 1918, the High Seas Fleet was not deployed. Furthermore, the Royal Navy had mined the North Sea so heavily that the High Seas Fleet was severely restricted in its scope for action.

The mood within the crews of the High Seas Fleets' capital ships declined rapidly in the second half of the war. In 1917, the atmosphere was politicized due to the [Russian Revolutions](#), peace initiatives and the splitting of the German Socialist Party. In summer, the crew on some capital ships in Wilhelmshaven struck in protest against the unequal treatment of officers and men and insufficient provisions. While the degree of politicization of the movement is still questioned by historians, there is a consensus that it was a consequence of an exaggerated class consciousness of the sea officers' corps, the poor leadership of increasingly inexperienced officers, a lack of motivation and poor provisions. Naval leadership reacted with unusual harshness. Two sailors, [Albin Köbis \(1892-1917\)](#) and [Max Reichpietsch \(1894-1917\)](#), were executed on 5 September 1917 after legally questionable court martials.

Last Naval Advance and Revolution

In September 1918, Germany ceased unrestricted U-boat warfare, which was a condition of armistice ceasefire negotiations. Therefore, as a consequence of the cancellation of supporting tasks for U-boat warfare, the fleet was free for new assignments, at least in the eyes of Admiral [Reinhard Scheer \(1863-1928\)](#), the head of the newly established Maritime Warfare Command (*Seekriegsleitung*).

Despite evidently low chances of success, the Maritime Warfare Command modified an extant plan for the deployment of the fleet against the Royal Navy. The new [government](#) was

not informed of this plan. Facing the imminent end of the war, military demands played a minor role in this planning. Instead, the Maritime Warfare Command seems to have focused on questions of honor and attempted to deliver a late proof of the necessity of a strong surface fleet to secure its continued existence beyond the end of war.

Without knowledge of the details of the plans, the crews of some of the capital ships that were assembled in Wilhelmshaven regarded the peace that was in sight as endangered and were unwilling to risk their life for an operation with questionable chances of success. Their mutiny led the commander in chief of the High Seas Fleet, Admiral [Franz Ritter von Hipper \(1863-1932\)](#), to cancel the operation on 29 October 1918. While some hundred mutineers were arrested in Wilhelmshaven, the 3rd Squadron was sent to [Kiel](#) on the suggestion of its commander. There the uprisings gained a new character, as the strong workers' movement in Kiel declared solidarity with the soldiers. Within a few days, the movement that had begun within the High Seas Fleet abolished the ancient order of the *Reich*.

Aftermath

These events continued to have an effect in diverse ways. The desire to restore the honor of the flag, which seemed to have been stained by inaction and [revolution](#), played a major role in the decision to scuttle the interned fleet in the Scottish Scapa Flow in 1919.

Furthermore, the leading sea officers of the *Reichsmarine* remained faithful to the Tirpitz tradition regarding the conviction of the necessity of a strong surface fleet. Finally, for nearly 100 years, the revolution represented a – mostly – negative *lieu de memoire* in German naval history, which was sometimes called the “trauma of 1918”. Only the People's Navy (*Volksmarine*) of the German Democratic Republic regarded it as a meaningful tradition and built upon it in various ways.

Stephan Huck, Deutsches Marinemuseum

Notes

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External Links

- [Epkenhans, Michael: Bismarck, Wilhelm II., and German Military Leadership, in: *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 13/1, Fall 2010, pp. 42-60 \(University of Calgary\) \(Article\)](#)

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