

# Preface

Unter jedem Grabstein ruht eine Weltgeschichte.

—Heinrich Heine

When Adolf Hitler ran for election against the incumbent President Paul von Hindenburg in 1932, he was supported by a political alignment similar to the one that had brought Hindenburg to power seven years earlier.<sup>1</sup> Bolstered by the votes of his former left-wing and Catholic opponents, Hindenburg secured his reelection; this was, however, a Pyrrhic victory for his supporters. Although a lesser evil than Hitler, the successful candidate of the left was an authoritarian, conservative rightist, whose dwindling mental capacity left him under the influence of radical right-wing advisors. Only nine months after his victory, as part of a top-level intrigue, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor. Although Hitler's party had not won an absolute majority, his appointment would have been inconceivable without its breathtaking electoral gains since 1930. Much has been written about the decline of the democratic and liberal middle parties in the Weimar Republic that benefited the Nazis. As the Hindenburg election shows, however, Hitler drew as much support from the traditional right as from the "dying middle" (Jones).<sup>2</sup> In 1930, the Nazi party replaced the German Nationalist People's Party (DNVP) as the predominant party on the right, and the formerly proud DNVP ended up as a junior partner in Hitler's accession to power (only to be dissolved a few months later). The Nazis had taken over much of the political spectrum that the traditional right could no longer control.<sup>3</sup>

The collapse of the DNVP not only originated in its failure to react to the socioeconomic changes of the period 1890–1930 but also in its problems of political strategy, program, and vision. To be sure, their diversifying social base made it ever harder for the traditional rightists to appeal to a mass audience with increasingly incompatible economic and social interests. But most of these developments lay outside their control, and it made better sense to them to invent strategies that promised to rally the masses regardless of socioeconomic change. And here they failed. The Nazis hardly understood structural change in German society any better than the traditional rightists, yet they managed to integrate the fragmented constituencies of

the German right and to make the inroads into the political middle that furnished them with a near-majority in 1932–33.

The DNVP inherited its political problems from the right-wing parties of the Wilhelmine Empire, the German Conservative Party, the smaller Free Conservative Party, the Christian Socialist Party, and the National Liberals. Since the 1890s the social upheavals of a rapidly developing industrial society had created fears but also aspirations among the German middle classes, farmers, artisans, and employees alike. Social groups, which had previously been “politically dormant,”<sup>4</sup> did not see their interests safeguarded by the parties, not even by those on the right. Consequently, they formed interest organizations that often competed with the parties. As the works of Geoff Eley on the Imperial period and of Peter Fritzsche on the Weimar Republic show, the German middle classes, far from being the passive victim of political manipulation from above, often articulated and organized themselves in autonomous and unorthodox ways.<sup>5</sup>

The most outspoken political organizations of the middle class were the *nationale Verbände*, the nationalist pressure groups. They usually focused on one single issue such as the buildup of a large battle fleet, the acquisition of new colonies, or the expansion of Germany to all areas inhabited by German speakers. After the First World War, returning soldiers broadened the spectrum of the nationalist pressure groups by forming veterans’ leagues and paramilitary organizations, many of which owned illegal stocks of weapons.<sup>6</sup> Most organizations of the “new right” acted as small but vocal extraparliamentary pressure groups and did not participate in elections, but their relationship to the established parties of the right remained ambivalent.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the new right offered a welcome propaganda machinery and promised to win mass support for the established parties; on the other hand, the radicalism and populist pressure of the new right often alienated and worried the old-style right. Throughout the period 1890–1930, the established right-wing parties tried to co-opt the grassroots organizations and to form a unity of action with them.

Two political problems exacerbated the tensions between the old and new right after 1900 and alienated the new right from the German monarchy: first, Germany’s diplomatic situation deteriorated, partly because of inept foreign policy and ambitious fleet building. After 1907, in particular, little room for maneuver remained, as an increasingly antagonistic international community thwarted German colonial and diplomatic ambitions. Second, the Social Democrats (SPD), a party with revolutionary socialist principles but with reformist and democratic goals, continued to grow until they became the strongest party in parliament in 1912. Although the Imperial Government was appointed by the emperor and did not need parliamentary approval, a strong opposition could make its policies more difficult, not to

speak of the social consequences of a broad movement against the established order. The SPD's rise alarmed the government and the parties right of the center and helped to unite the industrial bourgeoisie represented by the National Liberals with the agrarian conservatives of the German Conservative Party, the "alliance of iron and rye." For a while these groups settled their differences and formed alliances with the political middle, which also grew worried about socialist influence. The label for this policy, *Sammlungspolitik*, should not cloud the fact that these alliances resulted from autonomous efforts of the parties as much as from governmental initiative and mediation.

Yet even *Sammlungspolitik* failed to improve Germany's international situation and to check the socialist threat. The government and the established parties thus came under increased pressure from the new right, which demanded a more assertive foreign policy and repression of the socialists. Representatives of the new right, particularly of the radical Pan-German League, criticized the unsuccessful policies of the Imperial Government ever more loudly. After initially attacking chancellors and ministers, their critique came to include the emperor and the monarchic system. In his book, *Wenn ich der Kaiser wär'*, the leader of the Pan-German League (under a pen name) offered the emperor an unwelcome reminder that monarchy had once been elective and required the strongest and most determined man at the top.<sup>8</sup>

In 1914, Germany's political elite thus found itself challenged from both the left and the right. Whether domestic difficulties—in addition to diplomatic isolation—made Germany's leaders more inclined to risk war in 1914 is still contested, but they did expect the traditional system to gain prestige in a short, victorious campaign against France and Russia.<sup>9</sup> The war indeed inspired popular solidarity and enthusiasm at the beginning, but when a quick victory did not materialize, tensions within German society and the German right rose. The problems of the right were exacerbated by the efforts of the emperor and his government to steer a middle course to avoid alienating the workers, whose support for the war was essential. Many rightists, even among the old right, considered these policies fatal for Germany's military success and political future. The monarchy and the Imperial Government, feeling threatened by the left, therefore witnessed the rise of an outspoken and radical challenge from groups of the old and new right with widespread support in the top ranks of the armed forces. Although some rightists already thought about a dictatorship that would relegate the monarch to a subordinate role, most of them still wanted to save the monarchy, much as they disagreed with the Imperial Government. They looked for concepts and leaders able to unite their forces and to win mass support for an authoritarian system and a tough conduct of the war, whose success might in turn strengthen the old political framework and society.

Here the old-age role of Great Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz sets in. Among all rightists, Tirpitz not only enjoyed great prestige as the architect of the German battle fleet and as a symbol of the German aspiration for world power but also as a clever manipulator of the national parliament (Reichstag) and the press before 1914. Tirpitz had ensured continued support for his naval buildup by a broad range of the German public. To carry out a long-term program under the erratic Emperor Wilhelm II was already a unique achievement in itself. Although the value of Germany's battle fleet had become questionable in the last years before the war, Tirpitz continued to be regarded as a tough diplomat and shrewd politician. To the old and new right during the war and again in 1922–24, Tirpitz appeared as a statesman able to conduct an assertive foreign policy and to manipulate the parliament and public opinion, so as to rally the masses behind a confrontational diplomacy and maybe a dictatorship. Even if he could not eliminate parliamentary power altogether, most rightists believed that Tirpitz as chancellor would know better than anybody else how to "handle" the parliament. As Count Kuno von Westarp, the leader of the Conservative Party's Reichstag group, put it: "v. Tirpitz was a master in his psychological dealings with deputies to reach his patriotic goals. Unlike Bülow [chancellor from 1900–1909], he did not resort to coarse flattering; he rather knew how to empathize with the nature and motivations of deputies and parties."<sup>10</sup>

His political qualities also made Tirpitz appear as a potential unifier of the right; the old-style rightists respected his fleet-building program as a grand strategy for the stabilization of the political system whereas the new right saw him as the only tough politician left in the German government in 1914. Throughout the war and some phases of the Weimar Republic, many rightist politicians worked to give Tirpitz national leadership. His name meant a program behind which they could unite: an assertive foreign policy and a clever antidemocratic course at home. Tirpitz himself felt committed to an authoritarian state form and to German military and economic power. His monarchism was less sincere than his nationalism, but he nevertheless respected the heritage of the German monarchies and hoped to preserve them within the framework of an authoritarian state. He remained antiliberal and antidemocratic throughout his life and considered a democracy, at least in Germany, incompatible with power politics.

Despite some temporary success, however, Tirpitz failed to unite the right and rally the political middle behind right-wing politics. How this came about and what this process reveals about the German right before Hitler's rise to power is the subject of this book. Given its concern with the broader ramifications of German issues in 1914–30, it is more than a partial political biography. Tirpitz's case rather serves as an object lesson in the political strategies of the German right on the defensive against socialism and de-

mocracy.<sup>11</sup> Tracing Tirpitz's conspiracies, political contacts, putsch plans, and public agitation, this study examines strategies of the right to reconcile mass mobilization and participation in politics with elitist leadership, social privilege, and the dominance of the military in society. This is not great men's history revived: the story of old Tirpitz makes a stronger case for the powerlessness of leaders. The failure of an unusually skillful politician and manipulator of public opinion helps to explain a larger political development. Tirpitz's lack of success after 1914 or the demise of Germany's traditional right hardly deserve to be deplored per se, but they had fatal consequences because they helped to make certain that, instead of reactionary nationalists, the most violent and radical group of the right, the Nazi movement, seized control of the ailing Weimar Republic.

To consider the history of Tirpitz and the German right from 1914 to 1930 only under the aspect of their downfall and the Nazis' success, however, would seem unfair and would invite the danger of reading history backward. In light of the catastrophe of the Third Reich, almost all other parties and political movements before 1933 would appear as failures, too. Moreover, the traditional right—though with reservations and exceptions—accommodated itself to Hitler and concluded that his immediate goals agreed with its own. Although Tirpitz did not become a charismatic *Führer* and although the traditional right failed to rally its diverse factions, Tirpitz's involvement nevertheless reveals a strong and independent rightist dynamic before 1930. For better or worse, he and his associates left their mark on German history and society in the period under consideration, even if their striving and, in particular, Tirpitz's role ultimately appear as a failure.

This book will first summarize Tirpitz's life and achievements before 1914. As his prestige after 1914 rested on his role in German fleet building, this phase deserves special attention. After that, Tirpitz's political activity from the outbreak of the First World War on will be documented and interpreted in close consideration of broader issues. Because Tirpitz had many helpers and allies, this book often deals with a "Tirpitz circle" in analogy to Bruno Thoß's study on the political group gathering around General Erich Ludendorff after 1918.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes Tirpitz's political associates in the military, in parties, and in rightist clubs spun vast plots around him while he looked on, so that the focus of the analysis will temporarily shift away from him. If asked to highlight some results of this study, I would start with Tirpitz's role in the right-wing opposition to the chancellor and emperor before the middle of 1917. Through intrigue and influence on the press, he fought for unrestricted submarine warfare and became the right's unofficial candidate for chancellorship. He stood for uncompromising warfare against Britain, and his insistence on the submarine issue became popular far beyond rightist circles. This period of Tirpitz's activity reveals how Germany's

traditionally monarchist elites lost confidence to the emperor and much of the political establishment. This goes a long way to explain the elites' passivity during the revolution of 1918 and the confusion of the Weimar right. The crisis of confidence expressed itself first in Tirpitz's intrigues to replace the emperor in 1915. It reached new heights in the wave of national outrage after Tirpitz's dismissal in March 1916 and the pressure (partly inspired by Tirpitz) from the populace and the military elites on the Imperial Government to adopt unrestricted submarine warfare.

When the Imperial Government finally gave in, the highest military leaders, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, urged Wilhelm II to appoint Tirpitz chancellor. They abandoned their efforts only when they realized that they could not bring Tirpitz to power without a palace revolution, which even radical Ludendorff considered too risky for the time being. Alternative schemes to have the Emperor appoint a figurehead chancellor that Tirpitz could then manipulate also failed, but they demonstrated the erosion of confidence even within the emperor's closest entourage. Finally, Tirpitz became chairman of the new Fatherland Party in the last year of the war and—far from being a mere figurehead—helped to mobilize popular pressure for ambitious war aims and the continuation of the war. He took the party's claim to domestic neutrality more seriously than most others, and it was largely his merit that the party never became dominated by the Pan-German League and remained open to Jews, workers, and Catholics, at least in principle.

Tirpitz's engagement in the Weimar Republic reflects the problematic quest for rightist unity after the overthrow of the monarchy. As a middleman between moderate and radical right-wing groups, Tirpitz worked hard to form an alignment of antidemocratic organizations to establish a dictatorship and redraw the democratic Weimar Constitution with an authoritarian pen. Hitler's and Ludendorff's Beer Hall Putsch in November 1923 destroyed these schemes at a time when Tirpitz believed their success to be imminent. Tirpitz and his associates nevertheless continued their intrigues for a quasi-legal putsch, and rightists considered him a candidate for national leadership again. Tirpitz's efforts at this time also reveal that many rightists were willing to risk a potentially suicidal confrontation with France in the hope of ending reparations and Allied military control. With an insistence on a strong bearing without adequate military power, Tirpitz reflected the wartime illusion that Germany—if united under forceful leadership—would be able to overcome all numerical odds.

Tirpitz's election to the Reichstag on the DNVP ticket in May 1924, his candidacy for chancellorship, and his fight against the Dawes Plan aimed to undermine the pragmatic policy of Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann and, ultimately, to destroy the Weimar Republic. Tirpitz aimed to keep his party united and make it the leader of a right-to-center alignment against

Stresemann, who had many opponents in his own party. Tirpitz's last card against him was an intrigue to make Hindenburg president of the Republic and manipulate him later. At Tirpitz's behest, Hindenburg accepted to run and won the election. Tirpitz failed, however, to surround the president with rightist advisors and thus forfeited most of the political capital he had hoped to gain from the election. Less conspicuous than Tirpitz's attempts to torpedo Stresemann's foreign policy were his strivings from 1922 on to form an alliance between Bavarian antidemocrats (including some particularists) and rightists outside Bavaria. These efforts served both to undercut Bavarian separatism and to strengthen the popular basis of the German rightists; they made it easier for the leading Bavarian party (which was predominantly Catholic) to vote for the Protestant Hindenburg in 1925. What motivated Tirpitz, who had turned sixty-five in 1914, to substitute hectic intrigue for a peaceful retirement and what caused the failure of most of his initiatives will form the subject of the conclusions of this book.

Tirpitz's old-age role has not received much consideration yet. His memoirs and his two-volume edition of documents offer much information on his naval activity in the First World War, but their passages on his political schemes have gone nearly unnoticed. Although most documents covering his old-age role have been accessible for over twenty-five years, research has centered on his fleet-building.<sup>13</sup> Textbooks mention him as a proponent of unrestricted submarine warfare, as the leader of the Fatherland Party, and as the person who persuaded Hindenburg to run for president in 1925. That these activities came of a continual political involvement—except for some years after 1918—has escaped the attention of historians, because Tirpitz often acted behind the scenes and got involved in conspiratorial networks that are difficult to disentangle. Conspiratorial activity rarely leaves full and clear documentary traces. Tirpitz and his associates often were reluctant to write reports of behind-the-scenes discussions, because they feared that their letters might fall into the wrong hands. They were particularly afraid of the Prussian police of the 1920s, which was supervised by Prussia's Social Democratic interior minister. Tirpitz was stricken with panic when, on a visit to Berlin in 1920, he lost a suitcase with letters from the former empress alluding to his wartime intrigues.<sup>14</sup> His material thus abounds with vague hints at events, plans, and people. Decoding required a painstaking reconstruction of the plots from hundreds of folders of private correspondence and official documents in numerous archives. That in one letter the code name "the host" denoted the Bavarian right-wing politician Gustav von Kahr, for instance, became clear only from some incidental comments in another letter revealing that Tirpitz had stayed at Kahr's residence in 1922. The documentation would be more complete if Tirpitz's correspondence with his family, particularly with his son-in-law, Ulrich von Hassell, were accessible. Hassell,

a successful diplomat who joined the resistance against Hitler and was killed by the Nazis in 1944, was Tirpitz's closest political confidant and on several occasions supported his behind-the-scenes activity.<sup>15</sup>

That this study aligns Tirpitz with the German right might surprise readers who remember that the idea of a German navy was related to the liberalism of the 1848 revolution and that the Imperial Navy was a less aristocratic and more middle-class institution than the Prussian army. Tirpitz's "modern," collegial working methods seemed democratic, and his dealings with the Reichstag suggested to some historians that he had more than tactical respect for parliamentarism during the buildup of the battle fleet.<sup>16</sup> One needs to consider, however, that one branch of German liberalism had developed a radical nationalism and social conservatism that belonged to the right wing of the political spectrum. Tirpitz's set of mind was conservative, and some of his coworkers emphasized that even his decision making was far from democratic. (We should consider that they did not automatically consider democratic working methods a good thing.) Although he listened carefully to his colleagues' comments, he made and imposed his decisions in an authoritarian manner and tended to regard everybody who disagreed with him as a personal enemy.<sup>17</sup> Although he had often concealed his political outlook behind the aura of a "neutral" expert to garner support for fleet building, the harsh domestic and international controversies and his increasingly political role after 1914 forced him to take sides, and he aligned with rightists. That he had once appealed to a broader political spectrum through his fleet-building program was exactly what made Tirpitz so precious to a split right.

My interest in Tirpitz dates from a seminar on fin-de-siècle Europe offered by Professor Rudolph Binion at Brandeis University. He later supervised my dissertation, sharing his time, knowledge, and stylistic skill with extraordinary generosity. Volker R. Berghahn, Paul Kennedy, and John C. G. Röhl independently encouraged me to examine the rich, unexplored parts of the Tirpitz papers and offered advice once my research was underway. My examiners Gregory Freeze and Dietrich Orlow gave the manuscript a close reading and provided thoughtful comments. Stephen A. Schuker's interest in my work has proven as invaluable to me as his familiarity with the German archives. Doing archival research with Patrick Kelly, whose expertise on Tirpitz enriched my study, was a great pleasure. The course of my inquiry was influenced by the original and stimulating response to my project of Wilhelm Deist, Bruno Thoß, and their colleagues at the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt in Freiburg (now Potsdam). I have also drawn on Larry E. Jones's excellent insight into Weimar politics and his thoughtful comments on my work. Finally, Professor Roger Chickering gave the manuscript a thorough reading and provided valued criticism.

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## Notes

Chapters 6–9 are loosely based on information first presented in my article, “Politics of Illusion: Alfred von Tirpitz and Right-Wing Putschism, 1922–1924,” *German Studies Review* 18 (February 1995): 29–49.

1. Falter, “The Two Hindenburg Elections of 1925 and 1933: A Total Reversal of Voter Coalitions,” p. 225.
2. Jones, “‘The Dying Middle’: Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics,” and *German Liberalism and the Dissolution of the Weimar Party System, 1918–1933*; see also Hamilton, *Who Voted for Hitler?* pp. 6–8; Childers, *The Nazi Voter*.
3. Eley, “Conservative and Radical Nationalists,” p. 66; Hamilton, pp. 232–40. The “traditional right” here denotes all right-wing organizations with the exception of the Nazis. It thus includes both the old and new right introduced below. Although the Nazi Party may have shared characteristics with leftist extremist groups such as the communists, Nazi themes were predominantly rightist: extreme nationalism, militarism, and even anti-Semitism. For a deeper discussion with useful references, see Jones, “Nazis, Conservatives, and the Establishment of the Third Reich, 1932–1934,” pp. 41–43.
4. Eley, “The German Right, 1860–1945: How It Changed,” p. 243.
5. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*; Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany*.
6. See Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany*.
7. For the pathbreaking studies on the new right in the Imperial period, see in addition to Geoff Eley’s works: Stegmann, *Erben Bismarcks*; Puhle, *Agrarische Interessenpolitik*; and Evans, *Society and Politics*. For monographs on the single organizations, see the references in the introduction to Eley, *Reshaping the German Right*, and the entries in Fricke et al., eds., *Lexikon zur Parteiengeschichte*.
8. Claß [Frymann], *Wenn ich der Kaiser wär*’, pp. 219–20; see also *ibid.*, pp. 134–35 and 221–24.
9. Berghahn, *Germany and the Approach of War in 1914*, pp. 5–24; Wehler, *Kaiserreich*, chap. III, parts 1, 2, and 5; Nipperdey, *Machtstaat*, pp. 729–57.
10. Westarp, *Konservative Politik*, vol. 2, p. 197. All translations are my own.
11. The abundance of available material has discouraged historians from writing a scholarly full-scale biography. Tirpitz’s life and character, moreover, seem to have made him an unpopular subject to biographers. Ivo Lambi concludes: “Tirpitz still lacks a good biography. . . . Perhaps Tirpitz must remain a nonperson: in spite of excellent documentation, I would hesitate to attempt his biography.” *Navy and Power Politics*, p. 437. For an introduction into new paths of biographical research, see Levi, “Les usages de la biographie,” particularly the type *biographie et contexte*, pp. 1330–31.
12. See Thoß, *Der Ludendorff-Kreis*.
13. Exceptions are Kaulisch, *Tirpitz*, Thimme, “Der Fall Tirpitz,” and Thoß, “Nationale Rechte.” Kaulisch makes the only attempt at a full-scale biography but gives short shrift to the Weimar Republic. See, in particular, Thoß, “Nationale Rechte,” p. 28.
14. The lost papers also contained materials threatening to compromise the diplomatic career of his son-in-law. See Tirpitz to Behncke, 26 December 1920, Nachlaß Behncke, BA-MA, N 173/7; Tirpitz to Maltzan, 26 December 1920, TP 257; Schultze to Tirpitz, 21, 23, and 25 December 1920, TP 170.

15. Müller, *Erinnerungen* II, pp. 124–25, and III, p. 310; Widenmann, unpublished memoirs, Nachlaß Widenmann, BA-MA, N 158/1, p. 17; Schöllgen, *Hassell*, emphasizes the similarity of their political views but ignores Hassell's political assistance to Tirpitz, which Hassell admitted: Hassell, *Im Wandel der Aussenpolitik*, p. 220.
16. Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, pp. 36–41; Tirpitz, *Erinnerungen*, pp. 83–85 and 98–101. For the social structure of the naval officer corps, see Herwig, *Elitekorps des Kaisers*.
17. About Tirpitz's working methods, see Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent*, pp. 130–32. For the opinion of Tirpitz's coworkers, see Ahlefeld's speech of 23 April 1915, BA-MA, RM 9761; and Hollweg to Boy-Ed, 5 November 1926, Nachlaß Hollweg, BA-MA, RM 3/11675.