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John H. Maurer

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## AVERTING THE GREAT WAR?

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### Churchill's Naval Holiday

*John H. Maurer*

**W**inston Churchill is best remembered as a valiant leader in times of war. He should also be remembered, however, for his efforts to prevent the catastrophic great wars that would scar the history of the twentieth century. While it is largely forgotten today, on the eve of the First World War Churchill made a remarkable attempt to halt the head-to-head competition in naval armaments that was setting Great Britain and Germany against one another as adversaries. In a bold and unconventional initiative, Churchill invited Germany's rulers to take a "holiday" from the competitive building of battleships. As the civilian head of Britain's Royal Navy, Churchill made public appeals for a naval holiday on three separate occasions before 1914. Behind the scenes too he pressed for the opening of negotiations with Germany, using the holiday proposal as the starting point for discussions. It was Churchill's earnest hope that the naval holiday would stop the action-reaction dynamic of the arms race—what statesmen of that era called "the sea war waged in the dockyards"—and reduce the antagonism between Britain and Germany.<sup>1</sup> Rather than letting Britain and Germany be arrayed in opposing camps, he wanted to promote cooperation between Europe's two leading great powers.

But these hopes were to be disappointed. While Churchill's advocacy of a ship-building holiday generated a great deal of commentary in the press and discussion among statesmen, it utterly failed as a practical measure to arrest the naval arms race. Germany's rulers rejected the proposal. The holiday scheme also came under heavy criticism at home, from opposition political leaders, a hostile press, and even within the British government. The Conservative political opposition labeled Churchill's plan unworkable, while Britain's foreign-policy decision makers stood against arms-control negotiations with Germany. Confronted by stiff opposition both at home and abroad, Churchill's holiday proposal was stillborn.

In retrospect, it appears that a naval holiday stood little chance of success. The noted historian A. J. P. Taylor held the view that “probably only Churchill took it seriously.” But that was not the case. Germany’s leaders saw the proposal as a challenge to their attempt to build up a powerful navy to rival that of Britain. The German ambassador in Britain, Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky, reported that Churchill “meant the naval holiday to be taken completely seriously and he considered the idea as entirely practicable.”<sup>2</sup> Churchill was a realist, recognizing that serious impediments stood in the way of achieving his aim. Nonetheless, he argued that it was “a profound British interest to procure a halt” in the arms competition.<sup>3</sup>

## I

Winston Churchill became first lord of the Admiralty during the autumn of 1911, a time when the rise of German naval power posed an immense threat to Britain’s security. The previous summer, when Germany had provoked an international showdown with France over Morocco—the so-called Agadir (or Second Moroccan) Crisis—Britain’s leaders had even feared at one point in the confrontation that a war might erupt, with the German navy launching a surprise attack on the British fleet, scattered among its peacetime bases in home waters. As the civilian head of the Royal Navy, the government minister responsible for supervising Britain’s naval defense efforts, Churchill was determined to prevent Germany from defeating Britain at sea. “Of all the dangers that menaced the British Empire,” Churchill would later write, “none was comparable to a surprise of the Fleet. If the Fleet or any vital part of it were caught unawares or unready and our naval preponderance destroyed, we had lost the war, and there was no limit to the evils which might have been inflicted upon us.” In Churchill’s estimation, Germany’s battle fleet, concentrated in German home waters just across the North Sea from Britain, poised to launch a first-strike surprise attack, represented an “ever-present danger.”<sup>4</sup>

Churchill’s determination to ensure Britain’s naval preparedness for war did not mean that he considered a conflict between Britain and Germany inevitable. “I do not believe,” he told a political associate, “in the theory of inevitable wars.”<sup>5</sup> Churchill held the firm conviction that war would serve neither country’s best interests. In a speech Churchill delivered in 1908, he derided the notion that the rivalry between the two countries pointed toward a clash of arms. “I think it is greatly to be deprecated,” he stated,

that persons should try to spread the belief in this country that war between Great Britain and Germany is inevitable. It is all nonsense. . . . [T]here is no collision of primary interests—big, important interests—between Great Britain and Germany in any quarter of the globe. . . . Look at it from any point of view you like, and I say you will come to the conclusion in regard to relations between England and Germany, that

there is no real cause of difference between them, and . . . these two great people[s] have nothing to fight about, have no prize to fight for, and have no place to fight in.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of impending conflict, Churchill looked forward to “the peaceful development of European politics in the next twenty years.” This period of peace would be the result of “the blessed intercourse of trade and commerce[, which] is binding the nations together against their wills, in spite of their wills, unconsciously, irresistibly, and unceasingly weaving them together into one solid interdependent mass.” What Churchill called “the prosaic bonds of commerce” were dampening international crises, promoting the peaceful settlement of disputes between “civilized and commercial States.” The danger of international economic collapse, he contended, imposed “an effective caution and restraint even upon the most reckless and the most intemperate of statesmen.” To buttress his point of view Churchill could point to the fact that during the previous forty years “no two highly-organized commercial Powers have drawn the sword upon one another.”<sup>7</sup> Before becoming first lord of the Admiralty, Churchill thus downplayed the likelihood of a war between Britain and Germany.

The relentless buildup of the German battle fleet, along with Berlin’s rude unwillingness to reduce its naval program, however, led Churchill reluctantly to conclude that the ambitions harbored by Germany’s leaders did indeed pose a serious threat to the peace of Europe. The naval competition between Britain and Germany before the First World War is often considered the classic example of an arms race.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the years between 1906 and 1912 witnessed an intense head-to-head competition between the two powers in the building of modern capital ships—that is, battleships and armored (or battle) cruisers, the largest, most powerfully armed surface ships. During this six-year period Britain launched twenty-nine capital ships and Germany seventeen. Naval expenditures in both countries soared to pay for this arms buildup; Germany’s naval budget practically doubled, while Britain’s naval estimates increased by over 40 percent.<sup>9</sup> Churchill thought: “The determination of the greatest military Power on the [European] Continent to become at the same time at least the second naval Power was an event of first magnitude in world affairs.”<sup>10</sup> Churchill bluntly expressed these views in conversations with the German ambassador: “It was no good shutting one’s eyes to facts,” he stated, “and that however hard Governments and individuals worked to make a spirit of real trust and confidence between two countries they would make very little headway while there was a continually booming naval policy in Germany.”<sup>11</sup> The buildup of a German battle fleet, consciously designed by Germany’s leaders to undermine Britain’s security, stood as a major obstacle to cooperation between the two countries. Germany could remove this obstacle, reducing the danger of war and improving relations with Britain, by dropping its naval challenge.

When Churchill took office as first lord of the Admiralty, he held the aim of carrying out a program of warship construction to give Britain a clear lead in the arms race. The number of battleships built by Britain would be based on German naval construction. Thus, if Germany increased its battleship construction, Britain would automatically follow suit and outstrip the German effort. This strategy, Churchill thought, would impress on Germany's leaders the futility of trying to overcome Britain's naval lead. "Nothing, in my opinion," Churchill wrote, "would more surely dishearten Germany, than the certain proof that as the result of all her present and prospective efforts she will only be more hopelessly behind-

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*The German government viewed the holiday scheme as an attempt at political warfare.*

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hand."<sup>12</sup> Churchill's fundamental goal as first lord was to ensure that Britain remained decisively ahead of Germany

in the naval competition. To the famous newspaper editor J. L. Garvin, Churchill wrote, "As long as we do not relax our exertions, and proceed on the sober lines I have laid down, we shall—in absence of any new development—break these fellows' hearts in peace or their necks in war."<sup>13</sup>

By frustrating Germany's naval ambitions, Churchill aimed to make Berlin more amenable to a settlement of outstanding differences between the two countries. To the famous admiral Lord "Jackie" Fisher, Churchill maintained that British naval construction could be changed to permit "England and Germany to agree upon proportionate reductions."<sup>14</sup> Winning the naval arms race was not an end in itself but a way to convince the German government that cooperation with Britain would provide the basis for a more secure international environment and benefit the core interests of both countries.

To unveil his holiday proposal, Churchill chose a dramatic setting, the annual presentation by the first lord of the Admiralty to Parliament of the government's naval spending requirements for the upcoming year. Interest in Churchill's speech had been heightened by rumors of impending increases in Germany's shipbuilding program, presaging another costly round in the Anglo-German naval arms race, and by the fact that it was his first presentation of navy estimates since becoming first lord the previous October. Churchill did not disappoint his listeners. Before a packed House of Commons on 18 March 1912, he bluntly declared that Britain's naval efforts were directed at defeating Germany's challenge. He outlined the government's intention to execute a program of naval construction linked to German shipbuilding. Furthermore, Churchill warned Berlin that if it added more capital ships to its existing program, Britain would respond by further increases in its own. For every additional capital ship started by Germany, the first lord declared, Britain would build two. In this way Churchill stated the clear intention of Britain to keep ahead of Germany in the naval race.

Churchill coupled this warning to Berlin with his offer of a naval holiday. To break the competition in shipbuilding Churchill called for the introduction of “a blank page in the book of misunderstanding” between Britain and Germany. “Any retardation or reduction in German construction,” he declared, “will . . . be promptly followed here . . . by large and fully proportioned reductions.” In the year 1913, for instance, it was anticipated that Germany would start construction of three capital ships. If Germany dropped this annual contingent of ships from its program, Britain would “blot out” the corresponding five capital ships it planned to start that year. “The three ships that she [Germany] did not build,” Churchill told the House of Commons, “would therefore automatically wipe out no fewer than five British potential super-‘Dreadnoughts,’ [that is, the latest generation of battleships] and that is more than I expect them to hope to do in a brilliant naval action.” By taking a holiday from building for a year or even two, Germany would obtain substantial savings in naval expenditure. Churchill concluded: “Here, then, is a perfectly plain and simple plan of arrangement whereby without diplomatic negotiation, without any bargaining, without the slightest restriction upon the sovereign freedom of either Power, this keen and costly naval rivalry can be at any time abated.”<sup>15</sup>

Germany’s rulers found no merit in Churchill’s proposal. The kaiser sent Churchill a “courteous” message that a naval holiday “would only be possible between allies.”<sup>16</sup> To his intimates the kaiser was much less courteous: he branded Churchill’s speech “arrogant.” Germany’s Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg also dismissed Churchill’s initiative. “Churchill’s speech did not come up to my expectations,” Bethmann Hollweg wrote; “he really seems to be a firebrand past praying for.”<sup>17</sup> Germany’s leaders deemed Churchill’s offer unacceptable, declining to see it as a serious proposal that required an official response.

Berlin’s refusal to consider the holiday proposal did not deter Churchill, who remained committed to putting the idea into practice. He asserted that Britain “ought never to allow the discussion of this vital question to be stifled just because it is unwelcome to the ruling classes in Germany.”<sup>18</sup> Churchill had a further reason to renew the offer for a naval holiday. Toward the end of 1912, the Admiralty received intelligence indicating that Germany intended another increase in naval construction.<sup>19</sup> If Germany did build additional battleships, that would entail increases in British naval spending. To deter their construction, Churchill repeated the holiday proposal on two separate occasions during 1913. On 26 March, once again in the presentation of navy estimates to Parliament, Churchill offered to drop the four battleships Britain would begin during 1914 if Germany canceled or delayed the two capital ships it was scheduled to start. It was Churchill’s opinion that under these circumstances a “mutual cessation [of battleship building] could clearly be no disadvantage to the relative position” of Germany.<sup>20</sup>

Berlin officially responded this time to Churchill's call in the form of a statement by Bethmann Hollweg to the Reichstag that Germany had yet to receive formal proposals from the British government. Bethmann Hollweg's response, however, was disingenuous: in public, the German government appeared willing to entertain British arms-control proposals; behind the scenes, Germany's leaders worked to discourage an offer based on the holiday scheme.<sup>21</sup> Berlin instructed Lichnowsky to tell Sir Edward Grey, Britain's foreign secretary, in private discussion that it did not welcome further public mention of the holiday proposal.<sup>22</sup> The kaiser bluntly made it known that he took personal affront at the holiday scheme and did not want it raised again. The British ambassador in Berlin reported, "The Emperor said that he did not wish to make a fuss, but that he wished his words repeated quietly and privately in the proper quarter."<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Germany's navy secretary, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, went even farther, trying to play on British fears that Anglo-German relations would deteriorate, rather than improve, if Churchill persisted in pursuing his scheme. He told the German naval attaché in London to say to British leaders "that Churchill can now only injure the tender plant of a German-English détente by his holiday proposal."<sup>24</sup> When the German naval attaché reported back in the spring of 1913 that Churchill intended nonetheless to renew the holiday offer later in the year, Germany's leaders braced themselves to reject it. The kaiser wrote on the attaché's message, "We are on our guard!"<sup>25</sup>

The German naval attaché's information proved correct; Churchill repeated the holiday proposal in a speech in Manchester on 18 October 1913. In this speech Churchill gave the fullest public account of what he meant by the holiday proposal. He observed that Britain would start building four new battleships during the coming year, while Germany was scheduled to begin two capital ships. If Germany dropped its two capital ships, Britain would delete four battleships. According to Churchill's calculations, Britain would save twelve million pounds and Germany six million over the following three years if these ships were never built.<sup>26</sup>

The repetition of Churchill's offer created a storm of protest in Germany. Sir Edward Goschen, the British ambassador in Berlin, reported that the holiday proposal had received coverage "in all the more important German newspapers and has been received with almost universal disapproval." In the assessment of the British embassy, the only difference between German newspapers "lies in the varying degrees of politeness or rudeness with which they refuse even to consider the holiday year suggestion." For example, Count Ernst von Reventlow, the prominent foreign-affairs editor of the conservative *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, blasted Churchill, saying that Britain's first lord should take a holiday from making speeches.<sup>27</sup>

The German government itself waited almost four months before responding to Churchill. In February 1914, Tirpitz explicitly rejected the holiday proposal in a speech to the budget committee of the Reichstag, stating that Germany's leaders did not consider Churchill's speeches to constitute an official offer. Tirpitz told the Reichstag deputies that he had read about the holiday proposal "in the newspapers, for I have received no further intimation of the matter." Furthermore, Tirpitz made plain that if the British government officially put forward the holiday plan as the basis for arms-control negotiations, Berlin would reject it.<sup>28</sup> German decision makers wanted to shunt arms control to the sidelines in their dealings with Britain. German policy was made clear by Lichnowsky, who told British leaders that Germany sought to create "a thoroughly good and healthy

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*"There is no real cause of difference between [England and Germany], and . . . these two great people[s] have nothing to fight about, have no prize to fight for, and have no place to fight in."*

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atmosphere between the two countries and then they would see that it was perfectly absurd to continue this competitive race in defensive arms."<sup>29</sup> In Lichnowsky's opinion, "it was possible to arrive at an under-

standing *in spite of the [German] fleet* and without a 'Naval holiday.'<sup>30</sup> Before German decision makers would agree to limits on naval building, they wanted a political understanding with Britain to improve Germany's strategic position.

The German government viewed the holiday scheme as an attempt at political warfare. Goschen in Berlin noted that Germany's leaders "cannot get it out of their heads . . . that in proposing the Naval Holiday the First Lord has something up his sleeve, something that would be advantageous for the British, and detrimental to the German Navy."<sup>31</sup> Germany's rulers were particularly suspicious of Churchill. Tirpitz considered Churchill an "extraordinarily energetic English navy minister," committed to defeating Germany's naval challenge.<sup>32</sup> Berlin viewed British arms-control efforts as an attempt to paralyze the growth of the German battle fleet and limit Germany's aspirations to achieve world-power status. In his memoirs, Tirpitz complained of the "untiring efforts of British diplomacy[,] . . . [which] aimed . . . at sickening us of the fleet, and at picking holes in the Navy Bill, if possible in order to wreck it."<sup>33</sup>

Churchill's speeches infuriated the kaiser and Germany's naval leaders. Among the German leadership, he had acquired the reputation of a bully. The German naval attaché, Captain Erich von Müller, reporting on Churchill's presentation of the Admiralty's spending requests to the House of Commons in March 1914, commented, "Mr. Churchill departed from his former habit, and in his speech this year avoided making hostile remarks about the German Navy."

Müller thought that Churchill had changed his tone only because he “realizes that his former habit of ‘plain speaking’ resulted in the opposite of the intimidation that he hoped for.” In Müller’s assessment, Churchill now wanted to avoid in his speeches provoking Germany into the construction of additional warships, permitting Britain to take advantage of the slower rate of German naval building.<sup>34</sup> Müller’s report illustrates how Germany’s leaders viewed Churchill as habitual in his rudeness when speaking about the German navy and able to break this habit only when he intended some deception.

Tirpitz feared that arms-control proposals emanating from Britain might give an opening to domestic political opponents who opposed his program of battleship building. Inside the German government Tirpitz faced determined opposition to his naval policy. Bethmann Hollweg and the Foreign Office, for example, wanted to curtail shipbuilding as part of their diplomacy to improve relations with Britain. To them, battleships were bargaining chips—not so to Tirpitz, who saw the battle fleet as the instrument to improve Germany’s security and international standing against a hostile Britain. In addition, successive German treasury officials wanted to trim the navy’s budget, which they viewed as too costly. Treasury secretary Adolph Wermuth resigned from the government in 1912 rather than go along with increases in German naval spending. His successor, Hermann Kühn, proved just as resolute in holding down spending on the German navy. These internal opponents posed a constant threat to the execution of Tirpitz’s plan to build a battle fleet against Britain.

Tirpitz also feared that the holiday scheme might galvanize opposition within the Reichstag. In the late spring of 1913, Tirpitz complained that “the defense proposals with their immense demands on the German taxpayer, and . . . the general demand for a lasting understanding with England will pave the way for Churchill’s plans.” The navy secretary thought that “the mood in the Reichstag is . . . not now so unfavorable toward [a naval holiday].”<sup>35</sup> As a consequence of the general elections held in January 1912, the Social Democrats emerged as the largest party in the Reichstag, and they opposed increases in naval spending. Another consideration was that a naval holiday might dislocate the German shipbuilding industry, bringing about an increase in unemployment and social unrest.<sup>36</sup> From Tirpitz’s perspective, Churchill’s public arms-control appeals were aimed at undermining domestic political support for the German government’s naval policy.

Churchill faced an implacable foe in Tirpitz. When Colonel Edward House, the confidant of President Woodrow Wilson, met Tirpitz in Berlin during the spring of 1914, he recorded in his diary that the German navy secretary “evidenced a decided dislike for the British, a dislike that almost amounted to hatred.”<sup>37</sup> Tirpitz and the Imperial Navy Office showed no interest in the plan, except to find a way to defeat it. The holiday plan threatened Tirpitz’s life’s work of rivaling Britain at

sea by steadily building up German naval power. He believed that a naval holiday would upset timetables for warship construction and escalate shipbuilding costs, while increasing the likelihood of political confrontations over defense spending within the German government and with the Reichstag. Rather than go along with the holiday proposal, Tirpitz would have resigned from office. Tirpitz's determined opposition posed a serious impediment to reaching an arms-control agreement, blocking efforts within the German government to reach a settlement with Britain.

Behind Tirpitz stood the kaiser. The German naval buildup was the kaiser's creation. A powerful navy was the settled ambition of the kaiser, and he showed considerable rudeness to anyone who wanted to curtail it. Within Germany's ruling oligarchy, the kaiser consistently sided with Tirpitz when disagreements occurred over armaments programs, strategy, or foreign policy. He pushed for the building of additional warships even in the spring of 1914, after Tirpitz had concluded that further construction would prove counterproductive, only strengthening Churchill's ability to keep Britain ahead of Germany in the arms race. The kaiser, despite considerable evidence and advice to the contrary, discounted the baneful contribution of the naval buildup to the deterioration of Germany's strategic situation. "If England only intends to extend her hand to us under the condition that we must limit our fleet," the kaiser declared, "that is an unbounded impudence which contains in it a bad insult to the German people and their Emperor. This offer must be rejected *a limine* [i.e., at the outset]." The kaiser was strident in making plain his views about arms control: "I have shown the English that, when they touch our armaments, they bite on granite. Perhaps by this I have increased their hatred but won their respect."<sup>38</sup> Given the kaiser's attitude, Churchill did not have in him a willing negotiating partner.

## II

Opposition to a naval holiday was not confined to Germany; political opponents at home attacked Churchill as well. Arthur Lee, the principal spokesman on naval matters for the opposition Tories, "saw almost insuperable obstacles in the way of any attempt to carry that into practice."<sup>39</sup> The opposition press also blasted Churchill. The *National Review* thought it "really stupefying" that the Liberal government appeared obsessed with "the Disarmament craze," and it poured scorn on "the mountebank at the Admiralty" (that is, Churchill) for his "platform performances[, which] are as idiotic to us as they are offensive to Germany, and play into the hands of the vast army of Anglophobes [in Germany] who preach a *jehad* against this country. Politicians of this calibre will say anything to get themselves reported."<sup>40</sup> Critics of the plan considered it undignified for Britain to repeat an offer that Germany had already spurned. In the view of critics, by

repeating the offer Churchill only encouraged Germany's leaders to think that Britain might tire of the naval competition.<sup>41</sup>

The permanent staff at the Foreign Office and Britain's high-level diplomats also objected to the idea of pursuing arms-control discussions with Germany. Eyre Crowe, assistant under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, thought that any arms-control proposal put forward by Britain would "not be treated straight-forwardly in the negotiation, and I regard any such negotiation with so unscrupulous an adversary as highly dangerous."<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, Goschen in Berlin observed, "One cannot help thinking that a determined execution of what [Churchill] outlined in 1912 [to keep decisively ahead of Germany] would have a far greater effect upon German shipbuilding than what he has now done." In Goschen's opinion, "the best way of taking the wind out of the sails of the Big Navy Party in Germany is to state frankly that if threatened with further efforts to reduce our supremacy we shall make a big effort, by loan if necessary, to render that supremacy unassailable."<sup>43</sup> The Foreign Office staff and British diplomats thus held the same opinion as their German counterparts that arms control should be moved to the sidelines. In Goschen's opinion, Churchill should not renew the holiday proposal. Britain's King George V concurred with the view of his cousin the kaiser that Churchill drop the search for an arms-control agreement, adding to Goschen's report: "*I entirely agree with the hope expressed by the Emperor.*"<sup>44</sup>

Domestic political imperatives, nonetheless, had played a large part in moving Churchill to make the holiday proposal. Churchill needed to forge a consensus among the governing Liberals on naval spending, which caused considerable dis-sension within the party. Arms control reassured rank-and-file party members that the government was doing everything in its power to dampen the naval rivalry and pin responsibility for the competition squarely on Berlin. Both in Britain and on the Continent, many political commentators regarded Churchill's plan as an attempt to appease radicals within the Liberal Party who opposed increased naval spending. After Churchill's speech in Manchester, for example, the response of the influential Lord Esher was typical: "Winston was playing to the radical gallery in his recent speech, as it is inconceivable that so clever a fellow should have been silly enough to imagine that he had any chance of obtaining a favourable reply."<sup>45</sup>

That Churchill's holiday plan was aimed at a domestic political audience as well as Germany should not be surprising. Germany's naval challenge posed a painful dilemma for Britain's Liberal government: either to spend ever larger amounts to keep ahead of Germany or to relinquish the country's superiority at sea. Given these options, Britain's decision makers ultimately chose to increase naval spending. During the Liberal government's tenure of office, naval spending increased by over eighteen million pounds.<sup>46</sup> But this choice did not sit well

with British Liberals, who found the rapidly escalating cost of naval defense an appalling waste. To David Lloyd George, Britain's dynamic chancellor of the exchequer, the arms competition made no sense—it amounted to “organised insanity.” Lloyd George received considerable support among fellow Liberals when he pressed Churchill for reductions in the Admiralty's spending during the winter of 1913–14.<sup>47</sup> The complex interplay of domestic political and strategic factors required that Churchill secure acceptance of his naval building program within the government and the Liberal Party at large. Arms control enabled him to reconcile fellow Liberals with the Admiralty's efforts to stay ahead of Germany in the naval competition.

### III

In the spring of 1914, when the prospects for the holiday proposal seemed finished, an incredible opportunity suddenly presented itself to Churchill for the resumption of face-to-face arms-control talks with Germany's rulers. The occasion was an upcoming visit to Kiel by a squadron of British battleships invited by the German government to take part in that city's annual regatta. If Churchill accompanied the warships, he could meet with the kaiser and Tirpitz, who attended these annual festivities.

Albert Ballin, the German shipping magnate, director of the Hamburg-America Line, and intimate of the kaiser, acted as an intermediary in obtaining an invitation for Churchill to accompany the British squadron. Ballin had already served as a go-between to bring together the two countries' leaders. According to his biographer, Ballin “clung to his favourite idea that the naval experts of both countries should come to an understanding.”<sup>48</sup> Working outside official government channels, Ballin reached out to Sir Ernest Cassel, an influential banker and friend of Churchill. Ballin and Cassel wanted to arrange a meeting between Churchill and Tirpitz. Both men knew that Churchill would welcome the opportunity to take part in negotiations designed to reduce the naval rivalry and thereby strengthen the *détente* then emerging between the two countries. Before proceeding, however, Churchill questioned “whether Tirpitz really wanted to see me and have a talk.” Cassel assured him that “this was so.”<sup>49</sup> Encouraged by Ballin and Cassel, Churchill moved to open direct, high-level talks with Germany's leaders.

Despite the assurances of Ballin and Cassel, however, the German government showed no interest in renewed negotiations. Only the year before the kaiser had gone out of his way to prevent a visit by Churchill to Germany. The kaiser had feared that Churchill, even without a formal invitation, might show up at that year's celebrations at Kiel. In a brutally frank conversation with the British naval attaché, the kaiser “remarked very decidedly that he had *not* asked the First Lord to the Kiel regatta, but that the First Lord seemed to have a habit of turning up

uninvited, as he had done at the Kaiser Manoeuvres.” The British naval attaché also duly recorded: “The Emperor remarked that he did not know how to take the First Lord, what he said to him he thought Mr. Churchill transposed later. He was a man who could not be trusted.” The kaiser also described as a “fiasco” a visit to Germany in 1912 by Lord Haldane, who had tried to arrange a naval settlement at the initiative of Ballin and Cassel.<sup>50</sup> The kaiser’s cutting remarks had stopped any notion that Churchill might come to Kiel during 1913.

In the spring of 1914, however, the prospective arrival of British battleships—a visit the German government wanted—made it difficult for the kaiser to reject out of hand an attempt by Churchill to come along as well. “An invitation would not be opportune,” the kaiser instructed the German Foreign Office, “but he [that is, the kaiser] is convinced that an official enquiry by the British as to whether Mr. Churchill and his colleagues in the Admiralty would be welcome . . . would be received with pleasure.”<sup>51</sup> The kaiser, making a virtue out of necessity, even offered an invitation to Churchill through his brother, Prince Henry. “The Emperor wishes it to be understood,” Prince Henry told the British ambassador in Berlin, “that he has invited the First Lord of the Admiralty and the Sea Lords to Kiel officially, and that he hoped that at all events both Mr. Churchill and Prince Louis of Battenberg [the first sea lord] would be present during the Kiel week.”<sup>52</sup> The British naval attaché also reported to Churchill from Berlin:

[Prince Henry] wanted me to convey to you clearly . . . that the Emperor will undoubtedly be hurt if you and at least another of the Board do not appear. Prince Henry indicated that the Emperor would like to welcome H.R.H. Prince Louis of Battenberg, and gave me to understand that His Majesty is straightforwardly anxious to exhibit every friendliness on this occasion.

To make a long story short, what is evidently hoped for is that you and the First Sea Lord will both be at KIEL in the “*Enchantress*” [the Admiralty yacht].<sup>53</sup>

The back-channel diplomatic connection of Ballin and Cassel worked, and Churchill duly received an invitation to visit Germany.

To guide the anticipated negotiations, Churchill worked up a four-point arms-control agenda. At the top of his list was a discussion of the holiday proposal. Churchill also thought that room for agreement might exist with regard to limitations in the size of capital ships. In addition, Churchill wanted to explore ways to reduce the danger of surprise attack. He proposed finding means to reduce “the unwholesome concentration of fleets in Home Waters.” With a reduction in the readiness of the main British and German fleets to launch concentrated offensive strikes, both sides would have less to fear from the hair-trigger danger of surprise attack. Another topic for discussion was the development of confidence-building measures—that is, formal procedures for mutual inspections—which “would go

a long way to stopping the espionage on both sides which is the continued cause of suspicion and ill-feeling.” Churchill would later write that these topics, if discussed and “agreed upon, would make for easement and stability.”<sup>54</sup>

Given the attitude of Germany’s leaders, however, Churchill’s agenda stood no prospect for success. No genuine willingness existed on the part of the kaiser or Tirpitz to reduce their naval program. Quite the reverse was actually the case; both wanted to make additions to German naval strength during the spring of 1914. The kaiser, for instance, pressed for the construction of an extra battleship. Meanwhile, Tirpitz’s staff wanted to increase the readiness of the German fleet, so that it could carry out a “lightning-fast offensive.” To increase both the

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*In a bold and unconventional initiative, Churchill invited Germany’s rulers to take a “holiday” from the competitive building of battleships.*

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combat power of German ships and the fleet’s readiness, Tirpitz asked for an extra 150–200 million marks over and above the budget already allotted. Bethmann Hollweg,

citing both diplomatic and financial considerations, fended off these requests.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, these discussions among German decision makers clearly show that neither the kaiser nor Tirpitz looked to slacken the pace of the competition or seek an accommodation on the naval rivalry. Both were only waiting for a suitable occasion to beat down Bethmann Hollweg’s opposition and increase the threat posed by the German fleet to Britain.

Meanwhile, the kaiser’s adamant opposition to arms-control negotiations could not have been clearer. He wrote Bethmann Hollweg in the winter of 1914, “I wish to see the whole endless and dangerous subject of limitation of armaments rolled up and put away for good. What it comes to finally is that England is protesting against my right to decide on the sea power required by Germany.”<sup>56</sup> Germany’s foreign secretary, Gottlieb von Jagow, bluntly told Goschen that “the [naval holiday] idea is Utopian and unworkable.” Goschen held the view that “Winston Churchill’s proposal that there should be a ‘year’s inactivity in Naval construction’ for everybody is not liked here—ostensibly because the idea is unworkable—but really I expect, because it is an offer which they can’t very well accept—and which may make them liable to be told later by us—‘We have made you an offer and you wouldn’t accept it.’”<sup>57</sup> Goschen correctly concluded that the German government had no real intention of considering the holiday proposal as a basis for negotiation.

Lichnowsky too, reporting back from London to his government about the prospect of Churchill’s visit to Kiel, opposed a renewal of arms-control discussions in any upcoming talks. On 10 May 1914 Lichnowsky passed on that Churchill “will probably come [to Kiel] on board his yacht, accompanied by a few

Sea Lords and his beautiful and charming wife.” Lichnowsky warned his superiors, “Churchill is an exceedingly crafty fox and is sure to try to spring some proposal or other on us. . . . As a politician he is somewhat fantastic and unreliable.”<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, at the end of May Lichnowsky hazarded the opinion that if the first lord did go to Kiel, “I cannot imagine that it would do any harm, unless we start discussing unnecessary stuff with him.” By “unnecessary stuff” Lichnowsky meant negotiations about the naval rivalry. Lichnowsky volunteered to warn Churchill “that it would be better for him not to refer to the naval holiday or other nonsense of that kind.”<sup>59</sup> One can imagine Churchill’s response to Lichnowsky’s characterization of his holiday proposal—the number-one item on his agenda for talks with German leaders—as “nonsense.” But Lichnowsky did not speak only for himself; his opinion accurately reflected the German government’s opposition to any discussions about reducing the naval competition.

Churchill, while wanting to begin a constructive negotiation with Germany’s leaders, harbored few illusions about the reception that he was likely to receive when he presented to them once again the holiday proposal. “I do not expect,” he admitted, “any agreement on these [holiday proposals], but I would like to strip the subject of the misrepresentation and misunderstanding with which it has been surrounded, and put it on a clear basis in case circumstances should ever render it admissible.” Even if Churchill could not move Germany’s leaders to agreement, he could still use a German refusal to negotiate to his benefit in beating back the opposition at home to the Admiralty’s spending requests. The deep disagreement among Liberals about naval spending made it imperative that Churchill undertake some arms-control initiative to underscore Berlin’s intransigence against seeking a settlement. “I hope,” Churchill wrote Grey and Prime Minister H. H. Asquith, “in view of the very strong feeling there is about naval expenditure and the great difficulties I have to face, my wish to put these points to Admiral Tirpitz . . . may not be dismissed.”<sup>60</sup> If Churchill could not induce Germany’s rulers to cut back on warship construction, he could at least placate the radical Liberals who wanted to curtail British naval spending.

Getting an invitation from Germany’s leaders to visit Kiel, however, proved easier for Churchill than obtaining support from his colleagues in government, as his initiative ran into firm opposition from Grey. Although Grey had been informed of the back-channel attempt by Ballin and Cassel to open talks and approved of the visit of the British battleship squadron to Kiel, the foreign secretary was taken aback when Goschen’s telegram arrived with the invitation from the kaiser (through Prince Henry) for Churchill to go to Germany. “This will never do at the present moment,” Grey noted on Goschen’s telegram, “and there was so I understood no question of the First Lord and the First Sea Lord going with the fleet.”<sup>61</sup> Only two weeks before, Grey had received a note from Churchill saying

that a visit by him to Germany during the Kiel festivities was “impracticable.”<sup>62</sup> Grey quickly moved to put the brakes on negotiations led by Churchill. Instead of a summit at Kiel, Grey suggested that the two sides explore ways to reduce the naval rivalry by opening talks at a much lower level, involving the naval attachés in London and Berlin. If these negotiations showed promise, then, Grey thought, follow-up higher-level meetings could take place. Previous arms-control overtures to Berlin had failed, and Grey saw nothing to indicate that Churchill’s visit would produce any different outcome. Quite the contrary, the brief flurry of discussions with Jagow and Tirpitz only three months before indicated that the German government lacked any interest in serious talks.

Grey saw Churchill’s initiative too as a challenge to his own control over the conduct of Britain’s foreign policy. Grey resented what he perceived as Churchill’s interference in the purview of his department. Despite several challenges to his authority, Grey had shown himself a shrewd bureaucratic turf fighter, holding on to the reins of power for over eight years. Churchill’s attempt to engineer negotiations had the appearance of similar, previous efforts to get around Grey and the Foreign Office.<sup>63</sup> In his reply to Churchill’s request to negotiate with German leaders, a glimmer of testiness about trespass on the departmental responsibilities of colleagues appears: “I put this [alternative approach, i.e., talks between naval attachés] forward with diffidence as it is out of my sphere.” Asquith backed Grey in rejecting a visit by Churchill to Germany.<sup>64</sup> Goschen was duly instructed to inform the German government that notwithstanding the back-channel arrangements, Churchill would not accompany the British battleship squadron to Kiel. Goschen reported back the kaiser’s reaction: “His Majesty quite understood the situation and expressed his regret that they [that is, Churchill and Battenberg] could not come in the most friendly manner.”<sup>65</sup>

Despite Grey’s objections and Asquith’s veto, Churchill persisted in his effort to meet with Germany’s leaders. Even though Goschen diplomatically gave word that Churchill could not accept the kaiser’s invitation, the German government still remained unsure whether a visit might occur. According to Ballin, “Churchill sent word that, if Tirpitz really wanted to see him, he would find [a] means to bring about such a meeting.” A last-minute visit by Churchill thus remained a distinct possibility, with the Germans even reserving a mooring spot for *Enchantress* in case the first lord crossed over the North Sea.<sup>66</sup> Since the kaiser and Tirpitz wanted to avoid negotiations, they made no further effort to entice Churchill into visiting Kiel.

#### IV

German intransigence doomed Churchill’s holiday plan, preventing it from becoming the basis for serious negotiations between Britain and Germany.

Churchill sought to engage Germany's rulers in an attempt to rescue them from the strategic trap that they had made for themselves. He wanted to address head-on the naval rivalry that drove the antagonism between the two countries. But Berlin refused to consider restrictions on the buildup of German naval power. By threatening Britain's long-standing position as the world's leading sea power, German decision makers thought that they were providing for their country's security, as well as enhancing its rank and reputation on the international stage. The devotion of the kaiser and Tirpitz to the buildup of a powerful navy caused great harm, antagonizing even British Liberals and bringing Britain into the lists of the countries that sought to contain the rise of German power. Churchill would later write, "With every rivet that von Tirpitz drove into his ships of war, he united British opinion throughout wide circles of the most powerful people in every walk of life and in every part of the Empire. The hammers that clanged at Kiel and Wilhelmshaven were forging the coalition of nations by which Germany was to be resisted and finally overthrown."<sup>67</sup> Germany's rulers would have better served their own interests, along with the well-being of the German people, had they worked with Churchill rather than trying to thwart him.

The opportunity for Britain and Germany to reach an agreement would suddenly close during the summer of 1914 with the outbreak of war. Churchill's proposal to visit Kiel, as it turned out, represented a last chance for high-level, face-to-face talks between British and German leaders. Instead, Britain and Germany would settle their rivalry by fighting. To Churchill's great credit, he had sought to prevent a clash with Germany, to find a negotiated settlement to the naval competition and ways of making both countries more secure. At the same time, in preparing the Royal Navy for the coming trial of strength, Churchill made a vital contribution to the ultimate victory of British arms in the Great War.

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#### NOTES

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22. *G.P.*, vol. 39, p. 48 note.
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42. Minute by Crowe on Goschen to Grey, 10 February 1914, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 501, p. 737.
43. Goschen to Nicolson, 24 October 1913, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 486, p. 720.
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45. Esher to Stamfordham, 26 October 1913, in *Journals and Letters of Reginald Viscount Esher, 1860–1915*, ed. Oliver Esher and M. V. Brett (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1938), vol. 3, p. 142.
46. H. H. Asquith, *The Genesis of the War* (London: Cassell, 1923), pp. 107, 144.

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48. Bernhard Huldermann, *Albert Ballin* (London: Cassell, 1922), p. 192.
49. Churchill to Grey, 8 May 1914, in *Companion*, vol. 2, part 3, p. 1977.
50. Watson to Goschen, "Remarks of His Majesty the Emperor to Naval Attaché," 12 May 1913, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 475, p. 701 [emphasis original]. Despite the kaiser's assertion to the contrary, Churchill received an invitation to the German army's maneuvers in 1909; see Churchill to his mother, Lady Randolph Churchill, 4 August 1909, in *Companion*, vol. 2, part 2, p. 903.
51. Treutler to German Foreign Office, 27 April 1914, *G.P.*, vol. 39, p. 100.
52. Goschen to Grey, 18 May 1914, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 509, pp. 744–45.
53. Captain Henderson to Churchill, 16 May 1914, CHAR 13/45, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, U.K.
54. Churchill to Asquith and Grey, 20 May 1914, in *Companion*, vol. 2, part 3, pp. 1978–80.
55. On German armaments policy, see David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 339–40.
56. Wilhelm to Bethmann Hollweg, 9 February 1914, in *German Diplomatic Documents*, trans. E. T. S. Dugdale, vol. 4, *The Descent to the Abyss, 1911–1914* (London: Methuen, 1931), p. 320.
57. Goschen diary entry, 26 March 1914, in *The Diary of Edward Goschen, 1900–1914*, ed. Christopher H. D. Howard (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980), p. 268.
58. Lichnowsky to Jagow, 10 May 1914, in Prince Lichnowsky, *Heading for the Abyss: Reminiscences* (London: Constable, 1928), pp. 346–48.
59. Lichnowsky to Jagow, 26 May 1914, in *ibid.*, pp. 346–47.
60. Churchill to Asquith and Grey, 20 May 1914.
61. Minute by Grey on Goschen to Grey, 18 May 1914, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 509, p. 745.
62. Churchill to Grey, 8 May 1914.
63. Lloyd George, for example, when he visited Germany during the summer of 1908, had sought high-level negotiations with German decision makers. Grey, in response, complained to Asquith about this interference in the running of British foreign policy. The interview given by Lloyd George and published on New Year's Day 1914 had also elicited a response by Grey. Since Lloyd George supported Churchill's visit to Kiel, Grey might have viewed this initiative as yet another challenge to his authority.
64. Memorandum by Grey, 25 May 1914, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 512, pp. 748–49.
65. Since no formal invitation was sent by the German government—only the statement of Prince Henry to Goschen—there was some confusion over whether Churchill had actually been invited to visit Germany and about how to respond. The German embassy in Britain, for example, was unclear about the visit, apparently not knowing of Prince Henry's invitation. Lichnowsky told Churchill's mother at a dinner party that while the German government "had not invited him [that is, Churchill], . . . should he decide to come, he might be sure of a cordial reception"; Lichnowsky to Jagow, 26 May 1914. Goschen, consequently, tactfully used the occasion of a state luncheon to talk directly to the kaiser about the matter. First, however, Goschen ascertained that the kaiser had indeed instructed Prince Henry to offer a verbal invitation. The British ambassador then informed the kaiser—no doubt to his great relief—that Churchill would be unable to visit Kiel; Goschen to Grey, 3 June 1914, *B.D.*, vol. 10, part 2, no. 515, p. 750.
66. Huldermann, *Albert Ballin*, p. 192; Churchill requested information about how quickly *Enchantress* could reach Kiel; see J. D. Allen, handwritten letter, 7 May 1914, CHAR 13/45, Churchill College Archives, Cambridge, U.K.
67. Churchill, *World Crisis*, p. 115.



*Dr. Maurer is the Alfred Thayer Mahan Professor of Sea Power and Grand Strategy and served as the chair of the Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island. A graduate of Yale University, he is the author or editor of books examining the outbreak of the First World War, military interventions in the developing world, naval arms control between the two world wars, and a study about Winston Churchill's views on British foreign policy and grand strategy. He served on the Secretary of the Navy's advisory committee on naval history and has received both the U.S. Navy's Meritorious Civilian Service Award and the Superior Civilian Service Award. At the Naval War College, he teaches a popular elective course on Churchill and grand strategy.*

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