THE KAISER'S PIRATES

Hunting Germany's Raiding Cruisers in World War I

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Chapter 1

Kreuzerkrieg

'Our future is on the water'

Kaiser Wilhelm II, Stettin, 1891

When is a navy 'born'? Sometimes this can be hard to determine. Did the spiritual birth of Great Britain's Royal Navy take place in the time of Alfred the Great, or with the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588? Were the US Navy's first ancestors the Revolutionary War privateers, or their British predecessors? In other cases it can be easier to apply the specific markers beloved of historians, and Germany's navy is arguably one such. This book is not a history of the Imperial German Navy, nor of the arms race between Great Britain and Germany and its contribution to the outbreak of the First World War. However, some background is essential to understand the circumstances which created the tiny, scattered band of pirates in 1914.[1]

Prussia entered the Franco–Prussian War in 1870 with just four modern warships, built as a concession to Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV's 'navalist' cousin, Prince Adalbert, and they spent the conflict languishing impotently in port, blockaded by the superior French Navy. Although Prussia won the war comprehensively, seizing the disputed provinces of Alsace and Lorraine and destroying Napoleon III's Second Empire in the process, for the navy the experience was humiliating, and did nothing to endear the fledgeling service to the militarist ruling classes of the new, united Germany. Prince Adalbert retired in 1872 and his small fleet was placed under the command of a succession of generals and condemned to a coast defence role.

Seventeen years later German navalism revived with the accession to the throne in June 1888 of the 29-year-old Kaiser Wilhelm II. Wilhelm was distinguished by a peculiarly contradictory ability simultaneously to admire and despise his relatives on the other side of the North Sea, his grandmother Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and Empress of India, and her son, the Prince of Wales and future King Edward VII. At times Wilhelm's insecurities about these more powerful and influential members of his extended family bordered on the paranoid; today we would certainly call him 'chippy'. But he also made no secret of his desire to imitate the most notable

outward features of British dynastic power: the greatest global trading empire and, in particular, the largest and most sophisticated fleet the world had ever seen.

Arriving late to the largely western European party which was nineteenth-century imperialism, Wilhelm nonetheless dived enthusiastically into what became known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. In swift succession Germany acquired extensive territories across the continent, as well as a scattering of Pacific islands, a generous helping of New Guinea, and the important trading outpost of Tsingtao (modern Qingdao) on the east coast of China. In 1901 Wilhelm famously announced to the North German Regatta Association that 'We have conquered for ourselves a place in the sun. It will now be my task to see to it that this place in the sun shall remain our undisputed possession, in order that the sun's rays may fall fruitfully upon our activity and trade in foreign parts.'[2]

Germany had annexed approximately a million square miles of territory and some 13 million people by the start of the First World War. This belated but exuberant land-grabbing was accompanied by an ambitious policy of naval expansion. In the same speech Wilhelm went on to reiterate the point he had first made at Stettin ten years earlier: 'Our future lies upon the water. The more Germans go out upon the waters, whether it be in races or regattas, whether it be in journeys across the ocean, or in the service of the battle flag, so much the better it will be for us.'[3]

But Wilhelm had missed the point. The British acquired their 'informal empire' almost by accident, first building up influence and cultivating relationships with local rulers, then facilitating an influx of entrepreneurs of sometimes dubious moral repute, but possessed of an extraordinary ability to extract resources of every kind from the furthest-flung corners of the world. The fleet and its attendant bases spread across the globe almost organically, to protect the interests of these entrepreneurs and the revenue they generated. Britain needed a fleet because she had an empire, on which she depended to maintain her status as the world's only superpower.

Wilhelm, conversely, wanted a fleet above all else, and it seemed sometimes that his colonies were only an excuse to build ships; the naval tail was perhaps wagging the colonial dog. In June 1904 he confessed at a dinner in Kiel that as a small boy, visiting 'the family' at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight and seeing the mighty Royal Navy spread across the Solent, 'there awoke in me the wish to build ships of my own like these someday, and when I was grown up to possess as fine a navy as the English'.[4]

Wilhelm's ambitions did not lack support in Germany's corridors of power. The ageing creator of modern Germany, Prince Otto von Bismarck, was a late convert to colonialism, and one of his most prominent successors,

the vain, ambitious Bernhard von Bülow, could legitimately be described as an enthusiast. But there was no more passionate advocate for naval expansion than Alfred von Tirpitz. In 1890 this relatively young and junior naval officer had at a formal dinner so impressed the new monarch with his ambitions for a German fleet that nine months later Wilhelm tasked him with developing the strategy.[5] Tirpitz presented his ideas to the Kaiser on 1 December 1892. An informed naval thinker, he believed that true world power – *Weltmacht* – could only derive from a strong battle fleet capable of challenging the British for strategic control of the oceans. A battle fleet meant battleships: the large, heavily armed and armoured warships that were the currency by which a nation's naval power was measured.

The Kaiser was suitably impressed, but Tirpitz's growing influence brought him into open conflict with powerful figures at court and in the government, notably the State Secretary for the Navy, Admiral Friedrich von Hollmann, a man whose decisions Tirpitz later described in his memoirs as 'absolutely devoid of principle'.[6] This was perhaps unfair; von Hollmann was more concerned with the day-to-day, practical challenges of securing sufficient funds to build a navy – any navy – in the face of conflicting demands from the Army and other influential government departments, and was happy to settle for smaller, cheaper, coastal defence craft and commerce-raiding cruisers. It was the classic conflict between a single-minded visionary, lacking real authority or responsibility and thus able to think 'outside the box', and a politician consumed by the 'art of the possible', fighting for the very existence of his small, unfashionable department.

In the middle sat the Kaiser, driven by his desire to replicate the most visible elements of British power and anxious to claim his place at the 'top table' of global influence as soon as possible. Wilhelm wanted everything: Tirpitz's battleships in the North Sea to challenge Great Britain's Royal Navy, accompanied by Hollman's hordes of smaller, more versatile cruisers. However, the Kaiser was instinctively inclined to the cruiser option, which seemed to offer the 'quickest win'. Wilhelm saw cruisers, based in his new colonies, as an immediate way to make the new world power's presence felt. His ambitions were rooted in a misunderstanding of the application of sea power, which would contribute to the ultimate downfall of his pirates in 1914–15. British cruisers could indeed range across the globe enforcing British policy, but only because behind them loomed the world's most powerful battle fleet. The arrival of a British cruiser shaped the fate of nations not because of its own, often lamentable, firepower, but because of what it represented. Wilhelm failed to understand that it was not possible to pick and choose from the elements of a balanced fleet required to secure global sea control.

At first, the naval question was avoided by a series of unhappy compromises, essentially forced upon the protagonists by the trickle of funds made available by the Reichstag and the vacillation of the Kaiser himself, a man who, despite his obsession with sea power, never really understood it. In the course of one of the endless series of conferences, meetings and earnest debates which characterised German naval policy at this time, Tirpitz cornered the Kaiser, again pushing the case for a battle fleet. It is only too easy to picture the inexperienced monarch, trapped by his older, intensely intellectual subordinate, his magnificent domed head gleaming and legendary forked beard bristling as he forcefully made his case yet again. Desperately trying to maintain an argument with Tirpitz but exposing once again his essential ignorance, Wilhelm piped 'Why was Nelson then always calling for frigates?' 'Because', responded the sailor, 'he had a battle fleet.'[7]

Tirpitz's persistence was rewarded when he was asked to submit, at the Kaiser's request, a detailed recommendation for German naval construction. His submission called for sixteen modern battleships. Unfortunately, it coincided with an event on the other side of the world which, from a German perspective, illustrated all too clearly the high-handed arrogance of the British. In 1895 Cecil Rhodes, the Prime Minister of Cape Colony, sponsored the so-called 'Jameson Raid' into the Transvaal, in an attempt to provoke war and the eventual absorption of the independent, gold-rich Boer Republic into the British Empire. The raid, on 29 December, outraged many Germans, including the Kaiser, who sentimentally perceived the Boers as vulnerable kin of the German people, though the redoubtable Afrikaners proved perfectly capable of handling Rhodes' shambolic experiment in freelance warfare on their own. As far as naval policy was concerned, the raid caused Wilhelm to dither again. Cruisers in his African colonies, he naively believed, would have allowed him to help the Boers, and he ordered 'the purchase of armoured cruisers and cruisers wherever we can find them as soon as possible'.[8]

The Kaiser's thinking was deeply flawed. Had Germany sent cruisers to South Africa, the British could simply have sent their vastly superior battle fleet into the Baltic and blockaded Germany into submission. The only way to achieve sea power was to build a battle fleet of equal or larger size. Nevertheless, Wilhelm succeeded in amending naval policy, and Hollmann was charged with delivering a badly compromised shipbuilding programme which pleased no one: one battleship to appease Tirpitz, three cruisers for the Kaiser, and a promise to the generals not to ask for any more money at the expense of the army. Tirpitz was promoted to *Konteradmiral* and in 1896 he was posted out of harm's way to take command of the *Kreuzergeschwader Ostasien*, or East Asiatic Cruiser Squadron. He remained in Asia until the autumn of 1897, and perhaps his most notable achievement was one with

long-term implications for the Kaiser's pirates in 1914. Frustrated at his squadron's dependence on British facilities in Hong Kong, he was determined to establish an independent German base. After reconnoitring a series of potential locations, Tirpitz identified Kiaochow Bay (now Jiaozhou Bay) and its principal town, Tsingtao, as the most suitable location.

Tirpitz returned to Berlin in March 1897, but his successor, *Konteradmiral* Otto von Diederichs, concurred with his assessment and set about creating the circumstances to make Tirpitz's ambition a reality. What followed was a textbook example of European penetration. On 1 November 1897 two German missionaries were murdered in the Kiaochow area. The following week German marines stormed ashore, and Tsingtao fell in a few hours. In early 1898 the German Empire legalised this blatant piracy by 'leasing' the territory from the Chinese government for ninety-nine years, mirroring Great Britain's leasing of Hong Kong's 'New Territories' in the same year. Over the next sixteen years Tsingtao was transformed into a model German colony. As well as a modern base for the *Kreuzergeschwader*, by 1914 it boasted paved streets, banks, schools, government buildings, electric power, modern drainage and safe drinking water, as well as the famous brewery.

Of course, when Tirpitz steamed his cruisers out of the bay, all of this lay in the future. Back in Berlin, Hollmann's best efforts to please all of the people, all of the time, had failed. The politicians in the Reichstag, recognising weakness when they saw it, slashed his meagre budget in March 1896. Hollmann resigned and the Kaiser summoned Tirpitz back to Berlin, appointing him Secretary of State of the Imperial Naval Office. It took Tirpitz just nine days to present the Kaiser with his vision for the Imperial Navy, suggesting that he had spent much of his extended journey home preparing it. His concise memorandum pulled no punches. If the Kaiser wished to confront the British in South Africa and elsewhere, enlarge his empire, and win for Germany the international respect to which both men felt she was entitled, he wrote, only a strategic battle fleet capable of taking on the British in home waters would do the job. Tirpitz was a disciple of the American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan. Like Mahan, he believed that 'the vital centre of English commerce is in the waters surrounding the British Isles'.[9] Overseas cruiser warfare was now yesterday's news: 'When [Britain's] wealth is scattered in thousands of coming and going ships, when the roots of the system spread far and wide, it can stand many a cruel shock … Only by military command of the sea … can such an attack be fatal; and such control can be wrung from a powerful navy only by fighting and overcoming it.'[10]

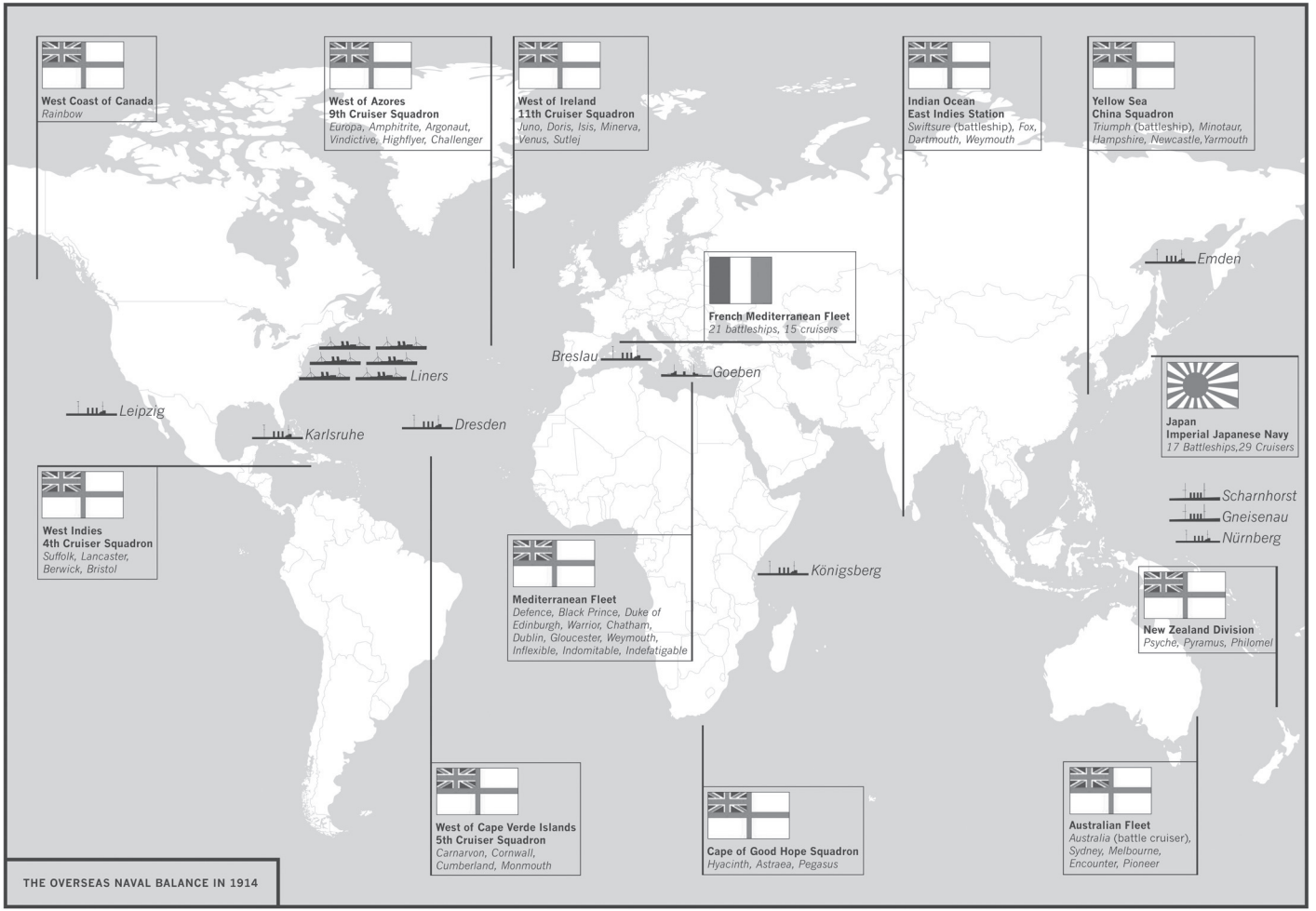
He might have won the argument, but tortuous negotiations still awaited Tirpitz, with an endless succession of suspicious princes and politicians. Tirpitz responded by rousing the people. He created a Press Bureau staffed

with enthusiastic young naval officers, who wrote tirelessly to the newspapers and toured the country, speaking on behalf of naval enlargement. He promoted the formation of a *Flottenverein*, or Navy League, which had over a million members by 1914. He relentlessly cultivated industrialists and others likely to benefit from naval expansion. On 26 March 1898 his efforts came to fruition with the passing of his first Navy Bill through the Reichstag.[11] The Imperial Navy was to receive seven new battleships, a figure which doubled a year later when Tirpitz exploited public outrage about Britain's prosecution of the second Boer War in South Africa to push through a second Navy Bill.

Between 1898 and 1914 German naval building was all about battleships, as the country plunged into a ruinous arms race with Great Britain. Tirpitz may have been correct in theory, but in practice Germany simply could not afford to outbuild the British at sea whilst simultaneously maintaining the largest army in Europe. Between 1905 and 1914 the Reich's defence budget increased by a staggering 142 per cent. And the British still had more battleships; hindsight tells us that Tirpitz merely succeeded in provoking them. He and the Kaiser failed to understand that the empire, and by extension the Royal Navy, represented Britain's lifeblood; as Sir Walter Raleigh wrote centuries before, 'there are two ways in which England may be inflicted. The one by invasion … the other by impeachment of our Trades'.[12] Unlike France, Germany and Russia, continental powers with huge standing armies and all of Europe's resources potentially at their disposal, the tiny, windswept North Sea island depended on sea power for survival.

In 1906, under the dynamic leadership of the maverick First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir John 'Jackie' Fisher, the British responded to the challenge. Fisher tore up the rule book and launched the revolutionary battleship HMS *Dreadnought*. Her lighter, more efficient turbine engines meant she could carry heavier armour and more big guns than anything else afloat; she put both sides back to 'Year Zero'. Britain also pragmatically abandoned her commitment to 'splendid isolation', entering into alliances and agreements first with Japan, and later with Russia and France, turning old enemies into what Winston Churchill called 'trustworthy friends'.[13] And these friends had ships. With the Japanese watching Asian waters and the French in the Mediterranean, Britain could concentrate her naval strength in home waters to face the Germans.

Fisher's new 'dreadnoughts' pressed the reset button on the naval arms race just as the demands of the German Army grew more strident, making it a race the Germans could no longer win. When Britain declared war on 4 August 1914, her Grand Fleet had twenty-eight dreadnought battleships and nine of the lighter, faster, battlecruisers. With just sixteen dreadnoughts and five


West Coast of Canada
Rainbow
West of Azores
9th Cruiser Squadron
Europa, Amphitrite, Argonaut, Vindictive, Highflyer, Challenger
West of Ireland
11th Cruiser Squadron
Juno, Doris, Isis, Minerva, Venus, Sutlej
Indian Ocean
East Indies Station
Swiftsure (battleship), Fox, Dartmouth, Weymouth
Yellow Sea
China Squadron
Triumph (battleship), Minotaur, Hampshire, Newcastle, Yarmouth
Emden
French Mediterranean Fleet
21 battleships, 15 cruisers
Liners
Breslau
Goeben
Leipzig
Karlsruhe
Dresden
Japan
Imperial Japanese Navy
17 Battleships, 29 Cruisers
Scharnhorst
Gneisenau
Nürnberg
West Indies
4th Cruiser Squadron
Suffolk, Lancaster, Berwick, Bristol
Mediterranean Fleet
Defence, Black Prince, Duke of Edinburgh, Warrior, Chatham, Dublin, Gloucester, Weymouth, Inflexible, Indomitable, Indefatigable
Königsberg
New Zealand Division
Psyche, Pyramus, Philomel
West of Cape Verde Islands
5th Cruiser Squadron
Carnarvon, Cornwall, Cumberland, Monmouth
Cape of Good Hope Squadron
Hyacinth, Astraea, Pegasus
Australian Fleet
Australia (battle cruiser), Sydney, Melbourne, Encounter, Pioneer
THE OVERSEAS NAVAL BALANCE IN 1914

battlecruisers, the *Kaiserliche Marine* was unable to contest control of the sea, and had lost the naval war before it had even begun.

The appointment of the single-minded Tirpitz did not, of course, mean that German shipyards ceased building cruisers altogether. But the competing demands of a battle fleet and the army meant that very few were deployed overseas in August 1914.

Cruisers

It is perhaps appropriate to examine exactly what a 'cruiser' was. In the era of the sailing navy, frigates, sloops and other small, fast, fighting ships were broadly categorised as 'cruising vessels', and were used to watch the enemy's ports and report the emergence of his fleet; to collect mail and despatches; to transport water and supplies; to scout ahead of the battle fleet; to harass enemy and protect friendly merchant ships; and to put ashore landing parties and agents. With so many roles, it is scarcely surprising that one collection of Nelson's writings cites some nine pages of quotes from the great admiral, bemoaning his shortage of these versatile vessels: 'my distress for frigates is extreme!'[14]

The technological advances of the nineteenth century changed the nature of the 'cruising vessel', although its myriad roles remained similar. Sailing sloops and frigates became steam-powered, propelled by first paddle-wheels and later screw propellers. Wooden ships were replaced by iron and then steel vessels, and broadside batteries of muzzle-loading cannon were replaced by smaller numbers of modern rifled guns mounted in revolving mounts or armoured turrets. The old ship types morphed into one new class of warship, the cruiser, which was then in turn divided into an equally bewildering array of sub-types.

At the top of the tree, but only loosely connected to it, were the dreadnought 'battlecruisers', the other half of Jackie Fisher's naval revolution. Fisher's first battlecruiser, HMS *Invincible*, was completed in 1908; the Germans were quick to copy the new design, and launched their own two years later. *Invincible* combined battleship-calibre heavy guns with exceptionally high speed at the expense of armour protection. This combination proved fatally seductive, and battlecruisers were inappropriately placed in the battle line throughout the First World War, with sometimes tragic consequences.[15] However, in their intended role as 'super cruisers', capable of hunting down and destroying enemy scouts or commerce raiders, they proved peerless, as some of the Kaiser's pirates would discover.

On a lower branch were the 'armoured' cruisers, which were almost as big as contemporary battleships and were intended to provide the scouting force for the battle fleet, as well as to act as commerce-raiders and commerce-raider

destroyers. Although they had a belt of armour plating along their sides, protecting their vulnerable engines, boilers and ammunition magazines, they tended to sacrifice both armament and armour for a marginal advantage in speed. Battlecruisers rendered even the most modern armoured cruiser obsolete. Too weak to fight and too slow to run away, the type suffered grievously during the First World War.

Older and still more vulnerable were the somewhat misnamed 'protected' cruisers, their vulnerable compartments shielded only by carefully placed coal bunkers and marginally strengthened decks. In the Royal Navy trade protection and colonial policing were the principal roles of these tired old ships, 154 of which Fisher sardonically classified as 'sheep', 'goats' or 'llamas' before scrapping them or reducing them to non-combatant training or accommodation roles and reassigning their crews to more useful jobs.[16] 'The first duty of the Navy is to be instantly ready to strike the enemy,' he explained, 'and this can only be accomplished by concentrating our strength into ships of undoubted fighting value, ruthlessly discarding those that have become obsolete.'[17]

Finally, by 1914 both Britain and Germany were building a new class of small, versatile cruiser, able to operate independently or with the battle fleet according to need. They were characterised by their very high speed, often produced by the installation of new turbines instead of the older reciprocating engines. To foster popular support for expensive naval construction programmes, both countries named these new 'light cruisers' after towns and cities, and they feature prominently in this narrative.

As a direct result of Tirpitz's desire to build battleships to confront the British in the North Sea, when war broke out Germany had just twenty-four 'armoured' or 'protected' cruisers, and twenty-five light cruisers, with only fourteen additional ships planned or under construction. Most of these were concentrated in home waters. In contrast, the Royal Navy alone had thirty-four armoured and fifty-two old protected cruisers, fifteen small 'scout' cruisers, and eighteen of the new light cruisers: a staggering total of 119 ships with another forty or so planned or building.[18] The British could also count on the support of French, Russian and, eventually, Japanese cruisers. Ship for ship, German cruisers could hold their own; in fact, the German ships were often newer, faster and better armed than many of their older opponents. But they were far too few.

The Kaiser's Pirates

When war broke out, the Germans had one battlecruiser, two armoured cruisers and seven light cruisers stationed outside home waters, supported by a number of old colonial gunboats and sloops. Several ocean-going passenger

liners had also been earmarked for conversion into auxiliary cruisers, should the opportunity arise to bring them home. The principal overseas formation was still the *Kreuzergeschwader Ostasien* at Tsingtao. At its heart since 1909 and 1910 respectively were the armoured cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, obsolescent but impressive ships of some 11,600 tons and carrying eight 210mm guns as their main armament, along with torpedo tubes and a plethora of secondary weapons. Manually served weaponry and steam engines meant that ships of this era required huge complements of men, some 850 in the case of *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*.[19] It is telling that, with no naval tradition to draw on, both ships had been named after Prussian generals. Supporting the armoured cruisers were the light cruisers *Nürnberg*, *Leipzig* and *Emden*. Identical in all but minor details, they displaced some 3,500 tons and were armed with ten 105mm guns, two torpedo tubes and smaller secondary guns. Like the two armoured cruisers, they were capable of speeds of around 23 knots on a good day.

Vizeadmiral Maximilian Graf von Spee, one of Germany's longest-serving and most distinguished naval officers, had commanded the *Kreuzergeschwader* since 1912. Although born in Copenhagen, von Spee was from an old and aristocratic Rhineland family: an unusual background for a naval officer as Germany's junior service tended to recruit officers from the middle classes. A gunnery specialist, he had joined the naval service in 1878, aged just 16, and had since amassed some thirty-five years of experience overseas, in home waters and ashore. He was a tall man, with broad shoulders and a distinguished, upright bearing, coupled with a piercing stare beneath heavy eyebrows, and a pugnacious pointed beard reminiscent of an Elizabethan merchant adventurer. A confident, aggressive commander with the gift of confiding in subordinates without compromising his authority, he was the perfect appointment for an isolated command far from home. According to one author, 'he was at all times a true gentleman. A Catholic and happily married, he had a warm humanity, a sense of fair play that endeared him to his subordinates [and] the fatalistic outlook characteristic of many seamen.'[20] His subordinate commanders were *Kapitän zur See* Felix Schultze (*Scharnhorst*), *Kapitän zur See* Julius Maerker (*Gneisenau*), *Kapitän zur See* Karl von Schönberg (*Nürnberg*), *Fregattenkapitän* Johann-Siegfried Haun (*Leipzig*) and *Korvettenkapitän* Karl von Müller (*Emden*).

On the eve of war von Spee's squadron was widely scattered. He had taken his two armoured cruisers on a tour of the Kaiser's Pacific possessions, and they were lying at Ponape (modern Pohnpei), in the Caroline Islands, purchased by Germany from Spain in 1899. Haun's *Leipzig* was operating independently off the west coast of Mexico, protecting German citizens caught up in the turmoil of that country's revolution and civil war. Von Schönberg in