INTRODUCTION

In the Great War of 1914–18, a conflict distinctive first and foremost for its unprecedented bloodshed, less than 1 percent of the 8.5 million combatant deaths were naval personnel lost at sea. Such a disproportionate distribution of the human sacrifice might lead one to conclude that the Great War at sea had, at best, a peripheral significance to the final outcome, and yet no serious scholar has ever made such an argument. Prior to 1914, in history's most expensive arms race to date, Britain defied the expectations of Germany in making the financial sacrifice necessary to maintain its naval superiority. Largely because of this superiority, the Allies were able to keep the fleets of the Central Powers contained in the North Sea, Baltic, and Adriatic, and to impose blockades on Germany and Austria-Hungary that, by 1916, contributed to serious food shortages in both countries. Faced with an insurmountable Allied supremacy in surface warships, the Central Powers attempted to revolutionize naval warfare by giving a central, offensive role to the submarine, a vessel originally conceived for a peripheral, defensive role (primarily as a harbor defender, against enemy blockade). In refocusing their efforts on undersea warfare, they created the issues that prompted the United States to intervene in a war in Europe, an unprecedented and, ultimately, decisive development. The focus on submarine warfare also caused the Central Powers to leave their capital ships rusting at anchor for much of the war, with dire consequences for the morale of most of their seamen. In 1917–18, Germany and Austria-Hungary (along with Russia, whose Baltic and Black Sea fleets had been similarly idled) experienced serious naval mutinies, and revolutionary movements in all

three countries attracted significant numbers of sailors. By the end of the war, the victory of the Allies against the submarine challenge, following on their earlier success in sweeping the seas of German cruisers and other surface raiders, left them free to use the world's sea lanes to transport supplies and troops to Europe from their overseas territories, and eventually from the United States, without which their ultimate victory could not have been accomplished. Thus, while the overwhelming majority of the effort, and the casualties, came on land, the action at sea was undeniably decisive to the outcome of the war.

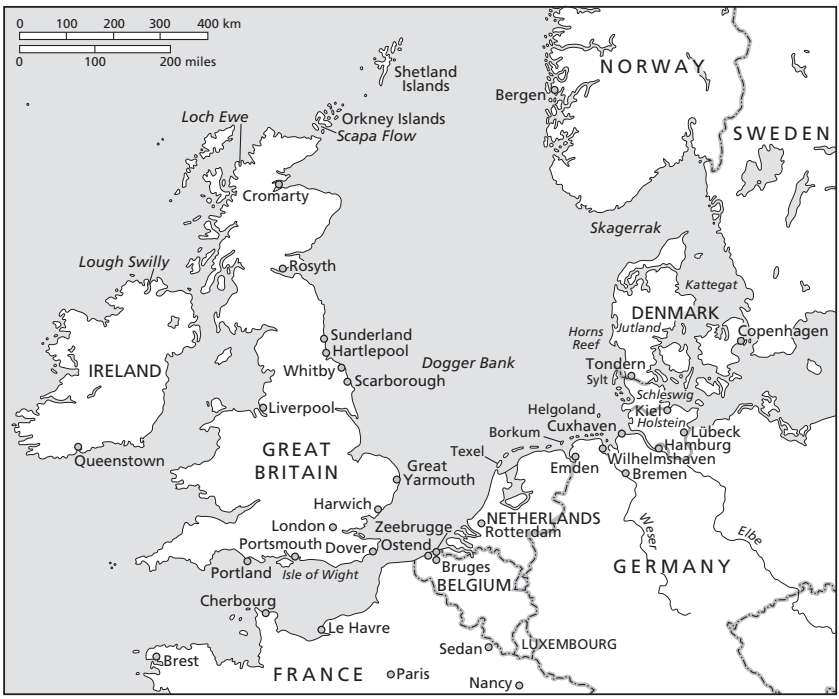
Each of the following chapters is framed to explain why the naval war mattered in the course of the Great War. For example, in Chapter 3, discussion of the early Allied victory in the naval war beyond Europe (1914–15) emphasizes the significance of this triumph for the subsequent free movement of food, fuel, and other materials essential to the Allied war effort, and, of course, for the exploitation of the manpower of the British dominions and India, the French colonies, and the United States, millions of troops whose deployment facilitated Allied victories on land in Africa, the Middle East, and, later in the war, in Europe. Chapter 4 discusses the role of naval considerations in prompting the Ottoman Empire to join the Central Powers and Italy to join the Allies, and the sequence of events that allowed the Allies to secure the Mediterranean in a way they would not in the Second World War, at least until 1943–45. Chapters 5 and 8, which deal primarily with German submarine warfare and the Allied response to it, address the complexities of the wartime Anglo-American relationship, both before and after the entry of the United States into the war in April 1917, and the impact of the Allied blockade of the Central Powers in determining the overall outcome of the war. Finally, the Anglo-American relationship at the peace conference and into the early postwar era will dominate the Conclusion, which will address the naval consequences of the emergence of the United States as the world's leading economic power and net creditor, and Britain's unaccustomed role as debtor, factors which provided the context for the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) and the interwar regime of naval disarmament.

Each chapter also highlights how the naval dimension of the Great War mattered in the evolution of warfare at sea. For example, Chapters 1 and 2 include discussion of the pre-1914 quest of navies to secure a prominent strategic role, as well as their efforts to adjust to dramatic improvements in the speed and firepower of warships. Chapter 2 highlights the role of wireless communication in the global naval

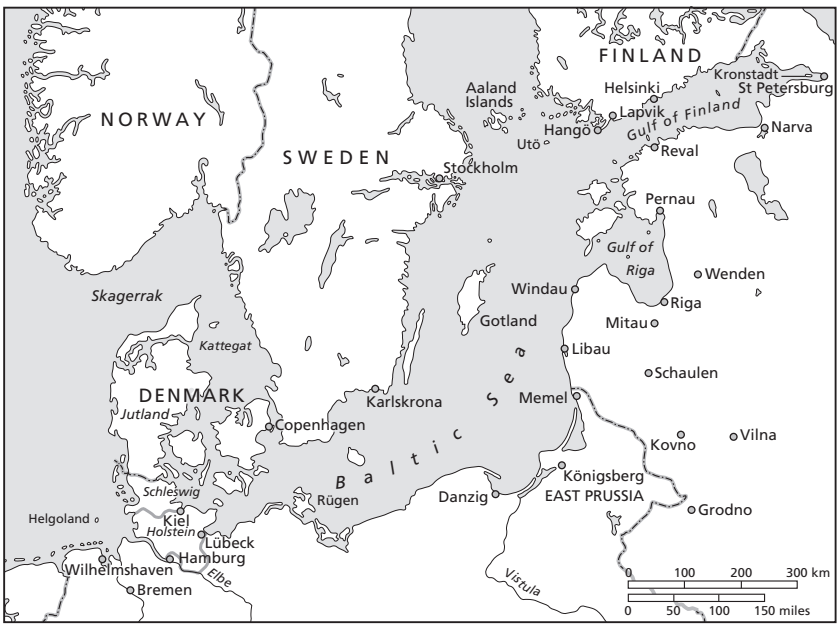
campaign of 1914–15, foreshadowing its significance during the rest of the war and in the Second World War. Chapter 5 focuses on the introduction of unrestricted submarine warfare and the Allied countermeasures against it, such as Q-ships (armed merchantmen with concealed guns) and the antisubmarine barrages at the Straits of Dover and Otranto. Chapter 6 uses the Allied failure at Gallipoli as a case study of unsuccessful combined (navy–army) operations, and compares it with the failure of the German combined operations at Riga the same year, discussing the lessons learned that influenced future combined operations. In Chapter 7, analysis of the Battle of Jutland compares the British and German navies in a variety of areas: command, control, and communications; tactical and operational cooperation across ship types; design, durability, and performance of ship types; firepower and fire control. Chapter 8, on the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and the entry of the United States into the war, discusses the political and practical challenges that had to be overcome in order to develop an effective inter-Allied system of convoys. Chapter 9, encompassing the final operations involving Russia, includes the second, successful German combined operation at Riga, and discusses its impact on the future of amphibious warfare. In general, the comprehensive approach recognizes the war's place in naval history as the last in which every country considered a Great Power – eight in this case – possessed truly significant naval power. The conclusion highlights the role of the postwar disarmament talks, coming in the wake of the demise of the navies of the Central Powers, as a step in the broader process of reducing the number of great naval powers to the three of the Second World War, two of the Cold War, and one in the twenty-first century.

As in my general study of the war,[1] the chapters presented here reflect a synthesis of the best scholarship on the subject, and also benefit from my own expertise on Germany and Austria-Hungary. In comparison with other general English-language accounts of the topic, this account of the naval war places greater emphasis on the strategies and operations of the Central Powers, reflecting my broader conclusion that at sea, as well as on land, the Great War may be conceptualized as a series of Allied reactions to the actions of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and my conviction that understanding their actions is key to understanding the war as a whole.

[1] Lawrence Sondhaus, *World War I: The Global Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).



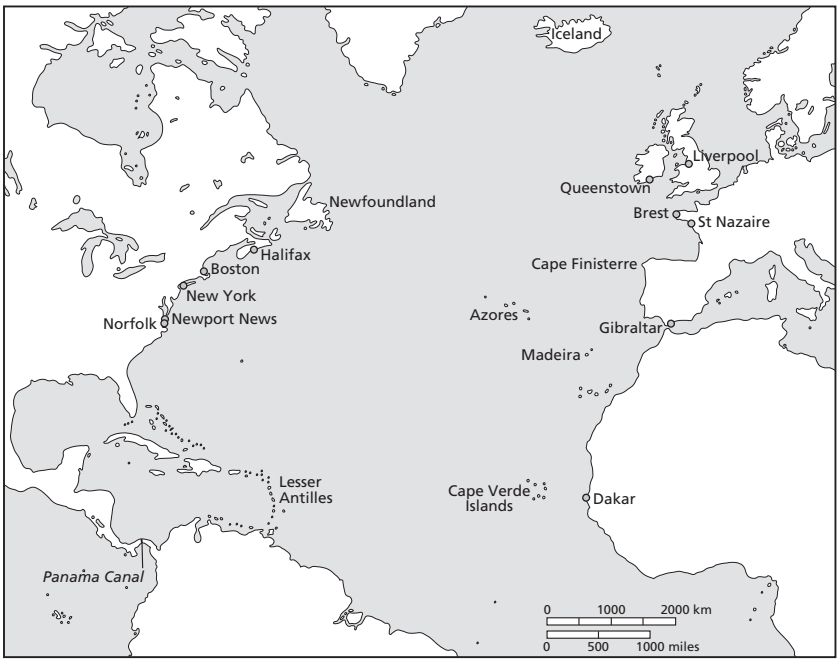
Map 1.1 The North Sea



Map 1.2 The Baltic Sea

Map 1.3 The Black Sea

Map 1.4 The Adriatic and Ionian seas



Map 1.5 The North Atlantic Ocean

1 AMBITION, IDEOLOGY, AND ARMS RACES

During the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), while the Prussian army recorded a series of triumphs from Sedan to the gates of Paris, the modest north German fleet languished at anchor. Alfred Tirpitz, then a twenty-one-year-old *Unterleutnant*, spent most of the war at Wilhelmshaven aboard the *König Wilhelm*, one of three armored frigates in a German navy that was far too weak to take on a French fleet that featured seventeen ships of the same type. "We youngsters were . . . indignant at not being let loose on the enemy," Tirpitz recalled later, but material inferiority dictated a passive posture. Thus, afterward, "the campaign which had been so glorious for the army lay heavy on the navy."[1] Admiral Prince Adalbert, cousin of King William I, and, since 1848, the greatest champion of Prussian sea power, underscored the navy's irrelevance by spending the war with the army. Owing to the inconsequential role played by the navy, it was allowed a representation of just twenty-two officers and seamen in the massive postwar victory parade held in Berlin in June 1871. In a time of great national triumph, the younger generation of German sea officers had difficulty dealing with such humbling experiences. Within a year, more naval officers transferred to the army than had done so in the previous decade.

Over the past century countless historians have stressed the significance of Prussia's triumph over France in 1871 in establishing the conditions that eventually led to the First World War. After the

[1] Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, 2 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1919), vol. 1, pp. 9–11.

decisive victory by Prussia and its German allies, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's decision to proclaim William I as German emperor at the Palace of Versailles further humiliated the French. Thereafter, Bismarck's insistence that France cede Alsace-Lorraine to the new German empire (Second Reich) made it impossible for the two countries to live in harmony and difficult for others to have close relations with both of them, thus providing the catalyst for a Europe of competing alliance systems. Finally, the requirement that France should pay a substantial indemnity to the victors set the precedent for the reparations that France would expect Germany to pay when the outcome was reversed in 1918. In addition to these political and diplomatic consequences, 1871 also confirmed the newly unified Germany as Europe's foremost military power, displacing France. The cult of the offensive that affected all European armies by the turn of the century had its roots in the Prussian–German way of war. Karl von Clausewitz's *On War* was translated and studied throughout Europe, often with a Darwinian preface, and the German military – its strategy, tactics, organization, and armaments – became a model for the rest of the world. But the Franco-Prussian War had equally fateful naval consequences. For Tirpitz, the humiliation of 1870–71 helped to form his belief that Germany must have a navy strong enough to engage any other fleet.[2] The quest to erase that humiliation ultimately placed Germany's navy and naval ambitions at the center of a reordering of European alliances, an arms race of unprecedented cost, and the development of new tactics and technologies, all of which shaped the character of the Great War at sea.

The German navy from unification to the Tirpitz plan

After 1871 the Imperial German navy grew considerably, but not to a coherent grand design. Over the next dozen years, the three armored frigates and two smaller ironclads on hand during the war against France were joined by a hodgepodge of eleven additional armored warships of various types. As early as 1883 Germany at least briefly had the

[2] On the effects of 1870 on Tirpitz, see Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Tirpitz-Plan: Genesis und Verfall einer innenpolitischen Krisenstrategie unter Wilhelm II* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971), pp. 58–59.

third largest armored fleet behind Britain and France, and the following year the Second Reich belatedly entered the scramble for colonial possessions, claiming territories in Africa and the Pacific. But the country only slowly developed a self-sufficient naval–industrial complex. Some German warships were built in British shipyards, and almost all of the rest had British armor plate or other components imported from Britain; the *Oldenburg*, commissioned in 1886, was the first battleship in the fleet constructed entirely of German steel. Meanwhile, during the 1870s and 1880s, a "Prussian school" of naval thought slowly evolved. Rooted in the military thought of Clausewitz, the "Prussian school" promoted an offensive posture, ironically for a navy materially incapable of assuming it.[3] In 1888, the accession of William II, a naval enthusiast who viewed Britain as Germany's role model and principal rival, ushered in an era of increased warship construction, coinciding with the emergence of Krupp (already world-renowned for its artillery) as the world leader in armor production. Yet throughout the first decade of the new reign, naval expansion continued to follow no particular plan; Germany's largest new battleships, the four units of the 10,000-ton *Brandenburg* class, were dwarfed by their British contemporaries of the 14,150-ton *Royal Sovereign* class, and the most replicated new battleship design, the eight 3,500-ton coastal defenders of the *Siegfried* class, were too small to have much fighting value.

In 1890, an American naval officer, Alfred Thayer Mahan, published *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1763*, the first of a series of books in which he provided battle-fleet proponents with historical arguments to support their cause. Drawing his examples from the early modern competition for empire between Britain and France, Mahan promoted the notion that "command of the sea" had been won or lost in decisive engagements between concentrated fleets of ships of the line, the battleships of the wood-and-sail era. His lively narratives of a bygone era of naval warfare deliberately played down the significance of cruising ships such as frigates, which the leading naval powers had traditionally dispersed worldwide to patrol the sea lanes and to protect their colonies. Mahan's works were especially influential in Germany,

[3] On the "Prussian school," see Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875–1914* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2002), ch. 3.