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**RUSSIAN NAVAL COMMANDERS ESTIMATED
BY THE GERMAN NAVAL ATTACHES IN THE YEARS 1901-1912**

SUMMARY. The paper analyses characteristics of Russian naval commanders given by the German naval attaches in their reports to Berlin in 1901-1912. While characterizing them the attaches paid attention, first of all, to their professional features. To their opinion they influenced the promotion of the Russian naval officers. Among a great number of top officials in the Russian fleet the German attaches especially valued "the Russian Germans" because to their mind they were particularly industrious and disciplined. In addition, in the notes there are data that characterize the general state of affairs in the main fleet — the Baltic and the Black Sea, which allowed to make up conclusions about the priority concerning their development in the plans of Russian authorities. On the basis of the material considered, the authors show how data provided by German representatives in St. Petersburg, influenced the formation of policy of A. Tirpitz's Ministry on the part of Russia, including such an important issue as conclusion of the maritime union.

KEY WORDS. German naval attaches, Russian admirals, Russian fleet, A. Tirpitz's Naval Ministry, naval alliance, naval rivalry

The problem of German naval construction in the early 20th century, and the related general worsening of international relations because of the outbreak of an arms race on the sea, is most often considered by historians in terms of the German-British naval rivalry. There is a completely understandable explanation for this. The marine antagonism between the two countries was one of the catalysts of the outbreak of the First World War. The topic, having been already studied over a 90-year period [1], still continues to attract the attention of researchers. The evidence of this is the works that have appeared in the 21st century [2].

However, marine affairs in the early 20th century were not limited to the difficulty in understanding between Berlin and London on the pace of building warships. Its transformation into a global question was influenced by other factors, which for various reasons have not been sufficiently addressed in the writings of historians; in particular, the development of relations between the Kaiser's Germany and Russia in the naval field. The nature of their orientation to some extent depended on the German naval construction's success in achieving its strategic objective. This objective was formulated by the Secretary of State for the Navy A. Tirpitz at the end of the 19th century, and was to achieve a ratio of the English and German fleets of 2:3. Only then, according to the Navy Minister, would Germany have a real

chance to achieve victory over “the marine mistress of the world” in case of war [3]. Therefore, Russia as one of the “great sea empires” of Europe gained special importance for Germany. The relationship between the two countries could have been built in three possible dimensions: hostile, neutral and allied [4].

German military plans for Russia had been primarily in the focus of the Kaiser’s Admiralty from the early 1870s to the late 1890s [2; 50-54]. Some of them became known to the Russian side in detail. For example, in October 1888 the Naval Staff of Russia had a secret protocol on the meeting of the Committee on the Defense of Germany of May 27, 1882. During the discussion, which was attended by such senior figures of the German armed forces as H. von Moltke, A Stosch, C. Blumenthal, L.A. Caprivi and others, a militarily significant document was adopted. It reflected plans of military action against Russia not only on land but also at sea [5].

However, the possibility of war initiated by Germany against Russia and its ally France at that time was so great that the discussion of the correlation of forces at sea in the upcoming confrontation was held both secretly and publicly. In 1890, in a German publication specializing in military subjects [6], an article was published reflecting the spirit of the time. It dealt with different versions of naval war between Russia and France on the one hand, and the Central Powers, led by Germany, on the other [6, 10].

With the advent of Alexander Tirpitz in 1897 as secretary of state to the Naval Office, the approach to the “Russian question” changed. Due to the fact that in Germany a first and then a second naval program were implemented, a new, dangerous opponent appeared: Great Britain [7]. In this situation, even with the active foreign policy actions of the officials of Berlin, Germany needed new European allies. Russia was considered to be the one. This question had been the subject of numerous and very detailed discussions by politicians and the military for almost all of the first fourteen years of the 20th century [4; 35-39, 67-77, 80-89]. The choice in favor of Russia as a satellite, enemy, or neutral state was determined by many factors. In this case, there was no doubt that the assessment of the armed forces and their resources to improve the potential of the Russian generals was made first.

To building a “correct”, as it was understood in Berlin, general military and political strategic line towards Russia, full information was needed not only about the Army, but also about the Navy. The German naval leadership was interested in everything: the control system of the Russian fleet, the number and types of warships, the degree of training crews, the training of senior naval officers, their personal and professional qualities, moving through the military ranks. The information about the Admiral’s part was of the most importance. They made it possible to characterize not only the elite of the Russian naval forces in general and its ability to operate in a variety of tactical and strategic terms, but also to determine the priority of the Russian government, which had several fleets.

Some of the main “breadwinners” of the information were the naval attachés. According to their status they had the right to report to the emperor personally, and only then to the appropriate agencies. Among the “diplomats in the sea field”, P. Hinze

can be highlighted, and to a lesser extent W. Keyserling and R. Fisher Lossaynen. Hinze served as a naval officer from 1903 to 1908, and then as the German military representative at the royal court in 1908-1911 [4; 80]. In historical literature, there was even some controversy about the extent of his influence on Wilhelm II and Tirpitz, but this impact was not in doubt. However, his predecessors, and the followers of Hinze, Keyserling and Fisher Lossaynen, have been considered merely as “clean informants”.

In the reports of a German naval attaché sent from St. Petersburg to Berlin in the period 1901-1912 there can be found relevant characteristics of individual senior naval officers, and analysis of the Baltic and Black Sea fleets. In a dispatch dated January 26, 1901, new movement in the Black Sea Fleet was noted. In particular, it stated that Rear Admiral Jenisch was promoted to the position of Chief of Staff in Sevastopol, and Vice Admiral J.A. Hildebrand was appointed as a senior leader of the Black Sea Fleet division [8]. These changes, as noted in the report, did not lead to strengthening of the staff of the Black Sea fleet, which at that time was underestimated in Russian naval circles. Further proof was the new appointment of Hildebrand. The opinion of famous Russian vice-admiral E. Alekseev, who personally knew many of the commanders who served on Black Sea ships, was unflattering. Alekseev considered him as having “little talent as a fleet management officer” [9], as evidenced by the rapid movement of Hildebrand from Asia to the Baltic Fleet, and then just as quickly to the Black Sea, which was essentially a place where he could do “less harm” [9].

In the reports of 1901-1903, Rear Admiral Z.P. Rozhdestvensky was very positively characterized. During his period of service in the Navy from 1865 to 1903 he was able to achieve great things. German observers noted his particular professional activity, fame and some popularity not only in the Navy, but also in political circles. The latter, as we know, was relevant to career advancement. Regarding this Russian naval officer, the assumption was that in the near future “he could become the leader of the Russian fleet” [9]. For example, in 1901, commanding a live-ammunition training exercise that took place in difficult weather conditions, Rozhdestvensky achieved outstanding results. The success of these workshops was noted by the Navy [10].

Another important factor in the rapid promotion of Rozhdestvensky was opposition to Vice-Admiral Makarov. As it was believed in Berlin, the old Russian Marine Corps officer did not much like Makarov. These sentiments helped Rozhdestvensky to be “a kind of alternative” to the certainly talented naval commander Makarov.

Along with Rozhdestvensky, the appreciation of the German experts went to Admiral Jenisch. In the reports with undisguised pride it is said that this officer had attracted attention not only with his professional qualities, but also with his appearance: “He appears a real German”. The conclusion was that Jenisch was a “very promising naval officer” [11].

However, not all the top Russian naval personnel received such benevolent assessment from the German analysts. For example, in a report to the naval attaché on

July 14, 1905, there was a brief description of the first official marine minister of Russia, A.A. Birilev. It specifically included the following words: "Vice-Admiral Birilev is an active, energetic person outwardly, a good speaker, yet he is not always understandable" [12]. It should be noted that such an impartial determination was in fact made by another Russian Vice-Admiral, F.C. Avelan. From 1903 to June 1905 he held a high government post: Head of the Marine Ministry and Vice Chairman of the Board of Admiralty, so essentially he was an unofficial Minister of the Navy. He was forced to leave this position after the tragic events in the Tsushima Strait in May 1905. So there was a reason to believe that when Avelan shared his thoughts with the German naval attaché about Birilev's personality and his ability to lead the fleet, he was jealous.

However, the Germans took full account of the emotional state of Avelan, while paying tribute to his professionalism, attentiveness and ability to understand people who served in the Navy. However, subsequent history confirmed that characterization of the retired vice-admiral. It was known that placement of Russia's first Secretary of the Navy, which covered many areas of naval policy, from military service to the program of shipbuilding, was incomplete and did not have a strictly defined plan. This was determined by the business and human qualities of Birilev.

Collecting data on the status of the Russian fleet, the Germans paid attention not only to information related to the officer corps. They were seriously interested in sailors' mood, the spirits of the crews, their combat training, and the relationship between officers and rank-and-file employees. It was clear that the circumstances of the past had been a subject of uneasy curiosity, but an integral part of the analytical work was to determine the operational status of the Russian naval forces. Thus, not very positive aspects of naval life were identified. In one of the conversations with the German attaché Hinze, Admiral G.P. Chuhnin clarified the relationship of senior naval officers with lower ranks. According to Hinze, Chuhnin "assessing the thoughts and feelings of the Russian sailors, called them only 'savages' and stated that to overcome this condition would require a lot of effort and time" [13]. However, as the main method of eradication of "wildness", Chuhnin considered "widespread use of not only stiffness, but also wisdom" [13].

"Critical attitude" to the lower ranks was characteristic not only of individual Russian Navy admirals. Hinze was inclined to generalize such an attitude. In his point of view, it was fairly typical of a large number of officers. That gave him a reason to believe in April 1906 that "the officers of the Black Sea Fleet are not sure about their subordinates" [13]. Hence the conclusion was that the combat effectiveness of Russian naval forces in the Black Sea was low.

In a report dated April 11th, 1906, Hinze gave information about Rear Admiral P. Rimsky-Korsakov, who was appointed as one of the assistants to the Secretary of the Navy Birilev. He was responsible for the management and the technical issues of the Russian fleet. As noted by a German officer, previously Rimsky-Korsakov had not had to deal with such a serious and responsible role, so it is quite understandable that scepticism rose in the officers' quarters about this appointment. From a conversation with the new assistant to the Minister of the Russian Navy, Hinze reached

the conclusion that Rimsky-Korsakov was not “a remarkable person”. However, he, according to the German representative, was a “sober-thinking and hard-working person. But if he entered into a new area, having mastered it, he would be able to honestly and conscientiously fulfill the assumed obligations” [14].

Hinze, speaking about the new appointment of Rear Admiral Rimsky-Korsakov, incidentally touched upon such an important theme for Tirpitz’s ministry and the Admiralty Staff as the work of the General Staff of the Russian Navy. He noted that “this management structure in its current state cannot solve a number of strategically important tasks”. These included a complete study of the potential of enemy fleets, the analysis of a possible future theater of operations, effective training exercises, training for naval operations, conducting rapid mobilization campaigns and others. [14]

Among the factors that at the time predetermined the low efficiency of the General Staff of the Russian Navy, the officer noted the small number of staff officers and their low salaries. The last circumstance made officers look for “extra job”, which adversely affected the results of their activity on the main field. Finally, Hinze points at Birilev’s not very competent leadership. According to the German expert, he indemnifies his poor activity through many time-consuming inspections and endless speeches. “Hinze concurs with his compatriot Admiral von Senden, who called Birilev a ‘talker’” [14].

Assessing the personal and professional qualities of the Minister of the Russian Navy and his assistant Rimsky-Korsakov, the German officer came to the conclusion that these two senior naval ranks would inevitably have friction, and as the result it would have a negative impact on the entire management of the Russian navy and its fighting ability.

At the end of his report, Hinze mentioned Deputy Chief of Staff Rear Admiral A.A. Vireneus. He described him as “a friendly man, but very excitable and indecisive”. Against the background of not exactly “pleasant Birilev and Vireneus” as naval officers, Lieutenant Stenger showed to advantage. His would seem not so great a commission, but this man impressed Hinze favourably. It seems that in this case, a significant role was played by two circumstances. Firstly, Stenger was the direct perpetrator of many critical staff assignments. Secondly, he was what is called a “full-blooded German”. Hinze, therefore, particularly welcomed his special “discipline, preciseness and reliability” in the performance of duty.

In the report, sent from St. Petersburg to Berlin on October 27, 1907, the German naval officer mentioned Rear Admiral R.N. Viren. At that time, he served as a Black Sea Fleet Commander and Acting Governor-General of Sebastopol. In his veins there was Swedish blood on his father’s side, and German on his mother’s side. In the Navy, he enjoyed great prestige. Viren had a booming career. In 1907, he was 50 years old. Moreover, he had already had considerable experience in the Navy. At the same time, health and strength allowed him to hope for further progress. These were sufficient prerequisites for personal progress. He was considered as a vigorous naval officer with a reputation as an honest, deeply religious man (Viren was a Lutheran). People

around him singled out his high demands to himself and his subordinates. According to Hinze, “such people in Russia can be found now very rarely” [15].

Next the German naval expert made the following conclusion: “He (Viren) is destined to have a great impact on the future of the Russian fleet, if he does not give way to the inertia of employees who do not like such leaders as him. This opposition is common to all countries. Russia in this regard is not an exception” [15]. Hinze, he believed, did not exaggerate the danger of the victory of the “Admiral’s inertia and indifference over energy and determination”. The attaché noted that Viren had “nerves of steel, but they cannot stand passive resistance and strikes from around the corner” [15]. “An active man, a great admirer of exercise”, the attaché writes, “he had to deal all day long with paperwork he despised and hated, instead of spending time on military activities” [15].

That lack of attention and care of the leaders of the Russian fleet in the practical training combat training of crews due to inactivity, according to the admiral, were one of the reasons for the defeat of Russia in the naval war against Japan. Therefore, the situation had to be radically changed to be better again in the next war. Viren’s reasoning was that state naval forces, as well as the presence of significant revolutionary fervor among sailors, would reassure Hinze that Black Sea Fleet readiness was low.

In the dispatch, dated July 19th, 1910, the attaché reiterates the characterization of officers of the Russian fleet. At this time in his vision several senior naval officers are mentioned. At first, he talks about the 52-year-old vice-admiral I.F. Bostrem, who served as the chief commander of the Sevastopol port and military governor of Sevastopol, and then the chief of the Nikolaev shipyards. Before that, Bostrem was the Black Sea Fleet Commander. The German representative considers him very active but a “quite unstable person”. Hinze also relates Bostrem’s distinctive features to his exceptional honesty and integrity. In high government circles, the Admiral had a good reputation, and Hinze believed “he was even considered as one of the contenders for the ministerial post” [16]. This probability is explained by the fact that in 1907-1908 he served as Deputy Secretary of the Navy and Vice-Chairman of the Board of the Admiralty. In foreign policy “preferences” Bostrem was considered as an Anglophile and Germanophobic. It is true, as noted by Hinze, that the latter was an exaggeration, although many people noted some elements of hostility to Germany in his remarks.

Vice-Admiral V.S. Sarnowski, Chief of the Black Sea Fleet, was called by the German officer a friendly, pleasant man to talk to. As for his professional qualities, Hinze could not give a clear assessment. He writes that Sarnowski as a professional naval officer raised at the Black Sea Fleet. In various positions which he had occupied, he had shown himself a man who knew the matter entrusted to him. This was especially true of warship command. However, according to Hinze, as Black Sea Fleet commander, Sarnowski did not make a strong impression on him [16]. In any case, the German representative did not find in him qualities necessary for a leader of such a high rank — rigor and determination.

Collecting information about this or that high-ranking member of the Russian fleet, Hinze, of course, relied on the judgments and opinions of people surrounding

him. In this case, the attaché tried not to be completely under the influence of such assessments, and to form his own attitude to “the subject of his attention”. For example, the 53-year-old Rear Admiral Baron Nolken had a satisfactory reputation among officers. He was even tipped for the post of commander of the Black Sea Fleet as the commander of a training squadron. It would seem that such a rumor said a lot about Nolken’s professional qualities. However, Hinze did not share such a “public persuasion”. In his opinion, Nolken did not possess a commendable competence of the naval officer. Among his characteristics, Hinze noted “a pedant without a great outlook”, who “rants a lot” [16]. However, such unsavory words from the German naval attaché are not surprising. He further explains that Nolken’s shortcomings follow from the fact that he is Livonia German with the “addition of Slavic complacency”.

We must do Hinze justice in saying that he still believes that not all the Russian senior officers have “Slavic flaws”. For example, the Chief of Staff in Sevastopol, Rear Admiral Novitsky is a quite “intelligent, hard-working leader and a very sensible officer” [16]. Captain of the 1st rank Pokrovsky, the commander of the Black Sea Fleet’s flagship, also produced a favorable impression upon Hinze as an “energetic officer and a professional of a good level”. “He must be a very good leader,” concludes the attaché. But Pokrovsky’s colleague, Captain of the 1st rank Danilevsky, is according to Hinze “a well-trained officer, but sharp in his statements, nervous and tough in dealing with subordinates” [16]. With these qualities, Hinze says, “it is unlikely that he will take on a higher position” [16].

In 1911, Bostrem was again appointed Commander of the Black Sea fleet, but after two Russian ships ran aground off the coast of Romania he was forced to resign. Vice Admiral A. Eberhard took over the position. The German naval attaché Keyserling immediately sent a telegram to Berlin, in which he gave a brief evaluation of the new chief. He described 55-year-old Eberhard as a well-trained officer in the theory of maritime affairs [17]. However, Keyserling stressed that in practice the Russian admiral had not shown himself before. At the beginning of the war with Japan, he was the commander of the battleship “Crown Prince”. Later he led the Sea Cadet Squadron, and then engaged in staff work. Therefore, as Keyserling thought, it was difficult to predict how successful Eberhard’s activities would be in his new position, where to maintain high combat readiness of the fleet it is necessary to deal with a lot of teaching and training [17].

As can be seen from the data above, the German naval attachés evaluated the professional and human qualities of Russian senior naval officers differently. They noted that they had both positive and negative sides. The characteristics mentioned, of course, were related to specific individuals. However, a significant feature of Russian Marine officers, in their view, was their lack of initiative. The reason for such a serious deficiency was “a huge number of orders and regulations that regulate the activity of the commander of any rank”. In this respect, the situation in the German navy favorably contrasted. It is known that during the First World War, German naval officers were favorably different from their British colleagues by non-standard actions and initiatives, and were considered as unbeatable sailors [18]. The Germans had begun to cultivate these qualities since the “arrival of Vice-Admiral” Caprivi, who served as head of the

Admiralty in 1883-1890 [19]. Therefore, the Russian deficiency was noticed immediately by the Germans.

Regimentation actions by Russian naval officers and stiffer penalties for disobedience and instructions produced in them, according to the German officers, a formal approach to their duty — they did what was ordered and what was not ordered by papers, so they did not even think — were a disadvantage [5; 14]. Lack of initiative spawned in the commanders, according to the Germans, distrust of subordinates [20]. Officers were required thoroughly to check the application of the orders “not to discover anything unexpected”. According to the German naval attaché, this spirit of pettiness was welcome and valued in the Russian fleet, and had a negative impact on the military training of sailors and officers.

With all the external rigor and soundness of the naval service, Russian commanders, according to the Germans, did not conduct regular and systematic training work, because “they are not capable of it” [20]. The Russians never created their own fundamental theories of the sea, and took up already existing foreign ideas. As proof of this thesis there is the adoption of Admiral T. Ob's ideas of the French marine's “young school” (*Jeune Ecole*) in the Russian fleet in the early 1890s. It was known to promote the benefits of cruisers in naval warfare [21]. It is worth mentioning that the Russian-Japanese war showed the failure of the French approach, which became obvious after the crushing defeat of the Russian fleet in the Far East. The Germans, on the contrary, introduced the spirit and the efforts of Tirpitz's “cruising school” as early as the late 1890, and chose the “right way” for the fleet.

According to the German attachés, in the Russian navy there were a few well-trained, original-thinking officers. They compensated for lack of professionalism by rigor and even dictatorship. Germans considered excessive theorizing in tactics to be another disadvantage of Russian commanders. The reason for this “phenomenon” is the existing climatic constraints for continuous navigation, particularly in north and north-west Russia.

Certainly, the underfunded fleet played a significant role in the origins of “special Russian naval theory”. Finally, the Germans could not ignore a “specific” feature of the Russian character which they did not have, which was fantasy. It certainly had a negative impact on seamanship. As a result, the picture painted by the German representatives implied that the Russian fleet had little productive intellectual work. It evolved more through different admirals' reasoning. Low readiness was a result of all of this. So from the naval point of view, there was no reason for Germany to be interested in an alliance with Russia.

There is no doubt that the naval attachés made a great contribution to the final negative assessment of Russia's potential alliance. It is clear that the head of the German Navy Department Tirpitz, from the beginning of his naval program proclamation, sought to stick to it as long as Germany was in the so-called “risk zone”: it was extremely dangerous to conclude any alliance, because it was likely to provoke the UK into premature naval warfare. Dispatches from the naval attachés in St. Petersburg once again persuaded Tirpitz in the correctness of his chosen tactic of avoiding alliances, even with such a gentle sea power as Russia.

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