

# ENGLANDERS AND HUNS

HOW FIVE DECADES OF ENMITY  
LED TO THE **FIRST WORLD WAR**

JAMES HAWES



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AND HUNS

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To Karoline von Oppen

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# CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Prologue: An Uncomfortable Excavation</i>	1
Part One (1864): The Setting of the Terms	9
Part Two (1865–6): The Last Summer Before Bismarck	71
Part Three (1870–71): The Franco-Prussian War	103
Part Four (The 1870s): The Wary Decade	131
Part Five (The 1880s): Bismarck vs the British	231
Part Six (The 1890s): The Only Friend of England	291
Part Seven: Fear and Loathing	329
Part 8: The Last Decade of the Old World	363
<i>Notes</i>	406
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	420
<i>Text and Picture Permissions</i>	423
<i>Index</i>	427





# PROLOGUE: AN UNCOMFORTABLE EXCAVATION

No nation has ever been given so long to make so momentous a choice: by the time Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, the line-up of the next major European war, its geographical flashpoint and the vast decision that would one day face Britain, had all been perfectly clear to thinking men for thirty-five years.\*

The great question of our modern history is not how or why precisely this long-foreseen European war did indeed at last come about, but why Britain came to take the side she did, turning what would have been a relatively swift and comparatively un-traumatic victory for Germany and Austria-Hungary into that defining cataclysm of our times, the breaking of empires and the womb of horrors, the Great War.

The trouble is that the facts in this case lie below what professional archaeologists – I was once one – call a *destruction layer*: one of those melancholy, and literally dark, lines in the earth which mark the violent end of a settlement, a city, perhaps an entire civilisation. In the case

\* ‘Today Prussia confronts her colossal neighbour as the effective protector of the dual monarchy’ (*The Times*, 22 September 1879); ‘What would we do in the event of an attack by France and Russia upon Austro-Hungary and Germany? This is the question eagerly debated at Berlin. The resolute action of England would turn the scale in favour of peace or war. It may now settle the destinies of nations’ (*Examiner*, 7 February 1880).

of the Great War the physical evidence of destruction is practically limited to that single, gigantic scar across northern France and Belgium, the Western Front, the most concentrated charnel house in all military history. But that was just the start. By the time the yet more terrible aftershocks had been visited on all Europe, the world of July 1914 was sealed off by a physical, cultural, and perhaps psychological destruction layer so profound that truth has simply yielded to myth.

Our current national myth about 1914–18 is that of the entirely meaningless, self-generating massacre, as seen in *Oh! What a Lovely War* or *Blackadder*, set off by a more or less random assassination, fought between rival European empires of more or less equal wickedness, run by generals of more or less equal inhumanity. This view has been taken up by masterful storytellers, for whom it has been pay dirt in the shape of tales like *Birdsong*, *The Ghost Road* and, most recently, that veritable tsunami of Great War schmaltz, *War Horse*. As the centenary of Britain's most far-reaching decision comes around, we have become a nation which, rather than seeking the truth, and hence a possible lesson in it, likes nothing better than to drown the imagined sorrows of anyone we can remotely claim as a relative who took part in this allegedly pointless and unfathomable tragedy.

Our actual historians are not, of course, entirely blind to the obvious fact that Britain freely chose to line up against Germany. But their story, too, is fascinating for what it says about us today. They all seem to agree that things were essentially fine between Britain and Germany until at least 1890.<sup>1</sup> Then, so goes the tale, the unstable Kaiser Wilhelm II, having kicked out the cunning but essentially sane old Prince Bismarck, went into cahoots with Admiral Tirpitz, who, like him, had a bizarre love-hate relationship with Englishness.\* The two deployed Germany's new industrial might to supercharge her previously almost non-existent navy. The Tirpitz Plan thus led – gratuitously, almost overnight and more or less all by itself – to Britain lining up against Germany: 'Anglo-

\* While planning to deter/browbeat/defeat the Royal Navy (depending on how you interpret his thoughts), Tirpitz sent his daughters to Cheltenham Ladies' College. And Wilhelm's first wish on escaping his own rebellious subjects in 1918 was for 'a good cup of English tea'.

German hostility dates from its inception' is the plain declaration of our greatest military historian, John Keegan.<sup>2</sup>

Since this thesis roundly blames the German leaders of 1897–1914, you might well imagine that it is a British version of the past. In fact, it was born in the 1960s in Germany, where it is now simple orthodoxy to see a *Grab for World Power* under Wilhelm II as the root cause of the *War of the English Succession*.<sup>3</sup>

The tale of Wilhelm, Tirpitz & Co. is comfortable to Britons because it clearly blames the Germans; it is comfortable to Germans because it clearly blames a *certain kind* of German – the scar-faced, sabre-rattling kind, who, like Prussia itself, quite simply no longer exists.

Blaming the Tirpitz Plan for everything thus preserves the idea, so fashionable in modern Britain, of a British Empire which was generally a Good Thing, if perhaps incompetently or pusillanimously run; and it preserves the idea, so essential to modern Germany, of a country whose naturally 'Western' path was deformed by the failure of its citizenry to resist a right-wing, war-mongering elite.<sup>4</sup>

In short, everyone today, in Britain and in Germany, and further afield, is pleased by a saga whose very modern moral rings out loud and clear, chiming so nicely with our happy view of events like the so-called Arab Spring: if only the Good Democratic People keep power away from the Bad Reactionary Cliques, all manner of things will be well and nation will speak peace unto nation.

Unfortunately, there is a problem with this comforting tale: that old devil, the detail.

One striking artefact lies in the Prussian Secret State Archives for 4 November 1899. At this time, virtually no one, even in Germany, had worked out the true extent or aim of Admiral Tirpitz's plotting, but there he is, informing the Staatsministerium, the innermost sanctum of Wilhelmian decision-making, that 'the present antipathy towards England is convenient for the strengthening of the fleet'. The gun could hardly be smoking more obviously: Tirpitz's plan for a mighty German navy did not *initiate* popular Anglo-German hostility, but deliberately *used* it. As Christopher Clark puts it in *The Sleepwalkers*: 'it was above all the sequence of peripheral clashes with Britain that *triggered* the

decision' (my italics).<sup>5</sup> In short: the Tirpitz Plan only ever existed, and was only ever politically viable, because the Anglo-German rivalry had by then already begun to bite.

So this is the great question: when did that fatal sequence of Anglo-German clashes really start?

By 1900, the *New York Times*, which had no earthly reason to spin things, could see that feelings between the British and the Germans – not the *governments*, the *peoples* – were already almost out of control.\*

## ANGLOPHOBIA IN GERMANY.

The public has lost no opportunity of manifesting antipathy toward Great Britain. In music halls the portrait of the Queen, thrown on a biograph screen, has been hooted. In public meetings the English have been denounced as a nation of bandits. In yellow papers, like the *Anti-Semite Staatsburger Zeitung*, and the *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, the expression of anti-British sentiment has often bordered on hysteria. In Dresden and other places English residents have been insulted.

Four years earlier, when the Tirpitz Plan had not yet even been devised, let alone undertaken, the same paper was already printing headlines like this:

**German Hatred of England Displayed  
in a Surprising Fashion.**

**GERMAN HATRED OF ENGLAND.**

\* The *New York Times*, 8 April 1900. Of course, this could just have been re-typed. But there's nothing like the actual look of the past to remind us that before all the stories, there are *facts* in history. This may seem pretty obvious, but over the past few decades an amazing number of otherwise sane and clever people have given time to a bizarre mixture of German nineteenth-century idealist philosophy and French eighteenth-century salon wordplay which seeks, in effect, to persuade us that there are no such things. So this book will occasionally present the artefacts exactly as they were.

A decade still further back, in 1885, the *New York Times*\* was telling its readers about

## ENGLISH HATRED OF GERMANY.

Back, still further: in 1879 it was already being claimed in the German press that Britain's underhand financial muscle was being systematically employed to thwart honest German enterprise in Samoa:†

Das augenscheinlich eine englische  
 Intrigue den Zusammenbruch der Firma herbeigeführt habe,  
 um ihre Factoreien bei Abwicklung der Geschäfte in englische  
 Hände zu bringen; das Londoner Haus Baring Brothers,  
 welches die letzte Godeffroy'sche Tratte nicht honorirt und  
 dadurch den Sturz direkt veranlaßt habe, soll das Werkzeug  
 in dieser Intrigue abgegeben haben.

Before that old chestnut of inevitable conflict due to capitalist rivalry is wheeled out, let's see a couple of pictures which really are worth many thousands of words, from the early mid-1870s and from each side of what was then still widely called the German Ocean.

These pictures date from the 1870s – that is, from a time when not one of the stock explanations for the Anglo-German rivalry works. In Disraeli's heyday, Germany could still not launch a serious ironclad without importing both design and technology from Britain (the flagship of her navy in 1878 had been built from keel to masthead on the Thames); Germany had still not even tried to get a single colony; and

\* *New York Times*, 18 January 1885/22 June 1896/16 November 1896.

† *Vossische Zeitung*, 11 December 1879. 'apparently, an English intrigue brought about the collapse of the firm so that its factories would be brought into English hands after the winding-up. The London house of Baring Brothers, which, by refusing to honour the last draft on Godeffroy & Co., directly caused its fall, is said to have been the tool of this intrigue'. From now on, a modern font will be used for translations from the German, but it's worth remembering that this is how they all looked in their day. While most people in the world can pick up and read the newspapers of their ancestors with little trouble (producing that entrancing combination of apparent familiarity and sudden, vast distance), the average modern German finds almost all German printed matter from before 1918 functionally illegible. The more you consider this cultural fact, the profounder it becomes. Since gothic type resists all digital search-engines, it also means that going through old German newspapers is still real, eye-killing work.



the balance of trade was still so massively in Britain's favour that the only German export to Britain which anyone noticed was the Germans themselves, who came as political asylum seekers and/or cheap labour. Yet by then – as we'll see – highly influential German media dons were telling legions of readers that their most profound enemies were these decadent, yet somehow still cunningly hegemonic Englanders, while the most respectable British journals discussed the chances of war with, and even invasion by, these brutish, yet somehow almost superhumanly efficient Teutons. The popular images were already in place on both sides: the Hunnish, jackbooted, spike-helmeted, clenched-fisted thug, and the slippery, cunning, inhumanly ravenous, Jew-ish octopus – the very same images, that is, which would appear again and again in the propaganda of the deadly century to come.\*

\* It's widely assumed that Britons only started thinking of Germans as like Huns after Wilhelm publicly urged his troops to act like Attila's men in quelling the Boxer Rebellion. In fact, as with so much else in this story, that fatal image was born decades earlier. See p. 130.



So how far do we really have to go back? When and why did Britain and Germany really start to be so at odds?

Let's start this uncomfortable excavation exactly half a century before the great destruction began. 1864: Wilhelm was a mere boy, second in line to the throne of one German state among many; Tirpitz was an obscure lieutenant in a miniscule navy; and Great Britain, the industrial, financial and naval hegemon of Earth, was, to her own amazement, on the verge of war with Germany. Not with *Prussia*: with *Germany* ...