

German ambitions

The German kaiser and politicians wanted their new country to become a strong and influential world power. One way of doing this was by gaining an empire. In the years after 1871, Germany did just that – gaining as much land overseas as it could (see Figure 2.4). Germany acquired the Cameroons, South West Africa, East Africa and Togo in Africa and Kaiser-Wilhelmsland in Papua New Guinea. By 1914, Germany had the third largest empire in the world, behind Great Britain and France. Sources B and C show how Germany's new colonies were seen as a challenge by the British.

Germany's new colonies needed a strong German navy to hold and defend them, just as Britain's empire needed a strong British navy. British politicians regarded German ambitions to expand their navy as threatening the British Empire. German politicians regarded Britain as standing in the way of Germany becoming a great power.

Your turn!

- 6th

 1 Write a paragraph to explain why Britain, France and Russia wanted empires.
- 6th

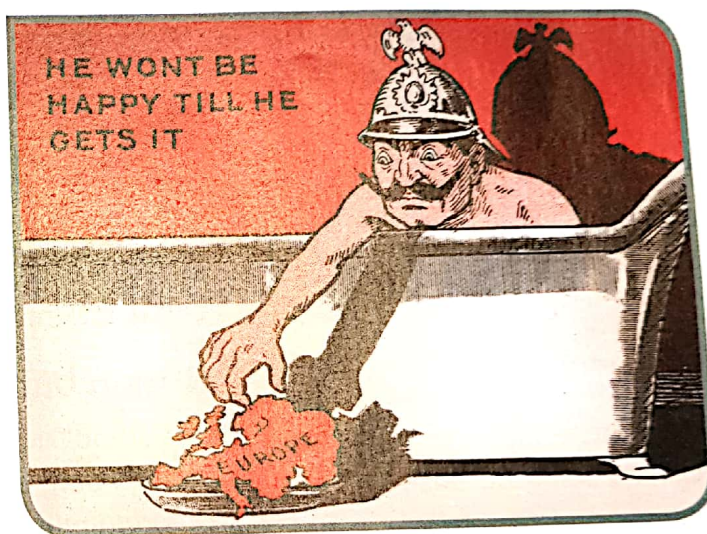
 2 Read Source A. Explain why you think the speech would **(a)** alarm British politicians and **(b)** please German politicians.
- 6th

 3 Look at Sources B and C. Both are cartoons showing the German kaiser. How far are they giving similar messages about the ambitions of Germany?
- 7th

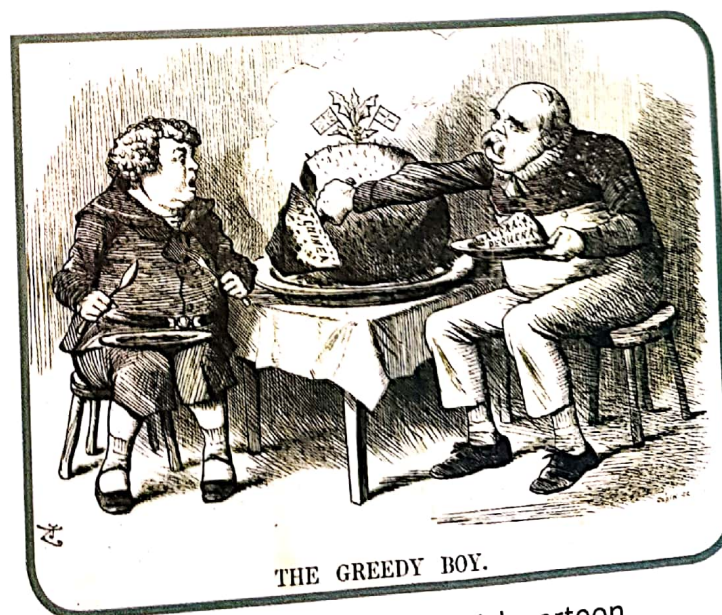
 4 Work in small groups and set up a debate. One side must argue that Germany had a right to join the other European powers in possessing colonies and the other side must argue that Germany had no such right. Use all the information in this section to help make your arguments.

Source A: From a speech made by the German Foreign Secretary, Bernhard von Bülow, during a debate in the German parliament on 6 December 1897.

We believe it is inadvisable, from the outset, to exclude Germany from competition with other nations in lands with a rich and promising future... We wish to throw no one into the shade, but we demand our own place in the sun... we will make every effort to protect our rights and interests... without unnecessary harshness, but without weakness either.



Source B: A contemporary British cartoon published in 1914.



Source C: A contemporary British cartoon published in *Punch* magazine in 1885.

Whose navy was biggest and best?

Key terms

Patriotism*: Love for your own country.

Arms race*: A competition between countries for the development and production of weapons.

Britain relied on its massive navy to keep open sea routes to its empire. Britain was an island nation, and so the navy was also essential to protect it from any European threats. Britain had ruled the seas without any challenge since the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. It had the most powerful navy in the world.

Germany builds a navy

Everything changed in 1898 when the new kaiser, Wilhelm II, announced his intention to build a powerful German navy. He believed that, if Germany was to become a world power, it had to challenge the might of the British navy.

- In 1898 and 1900, Germany passed the German Navy Laws. The first one ordered the building of 19 battleships; the second, another 38.
- The German naval chief, Admiral Tirpitz, set up the Navy League. This organisation arranged tours of shipyards and gave lectures about the growing German navy. These were intended to encourage public interest in the navy and develop a sense of patriotism* amongst German people.

Did you know?

German sailors called their own battleships the 'five-minute ships' because they believed a Dreadnought could sink them in five minutes.

Britain builds a 'Dreadnought'

British politicians were alarmed. Their response was to order the building of the most powerful battleship ever built – HMS *Dreadnought*. Launched in 1906, it was so advanced that all other battleships were instantly out of date. It gave its name to a whole new class of battleships.

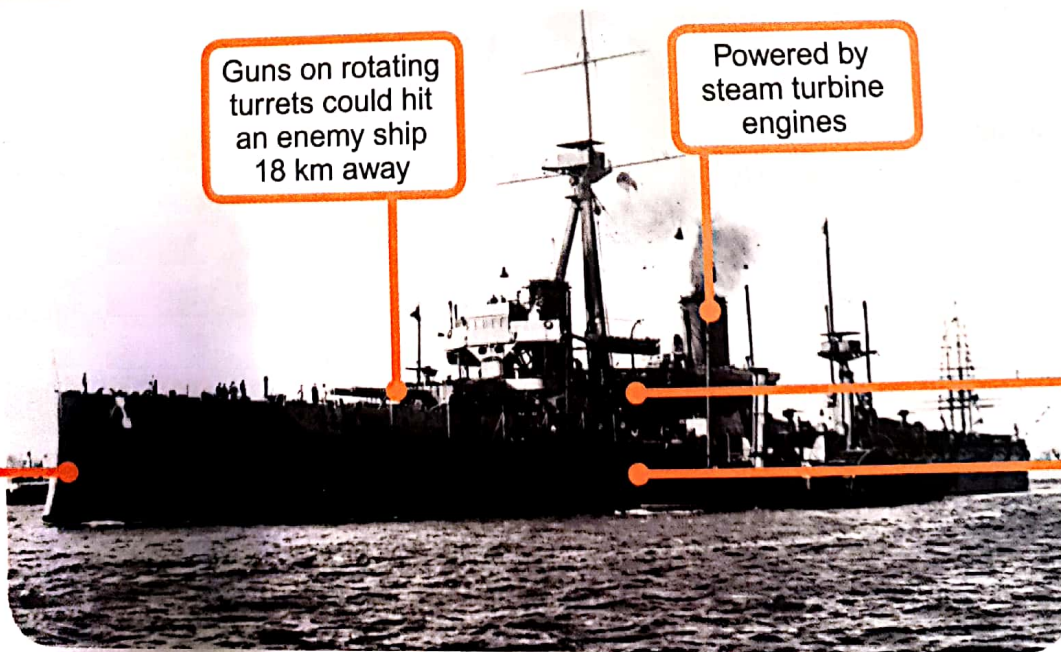


Figure 2.5: The British ship HMS *Dreadnought*: the most advanced warship at the time.



Source D: From a paper written by Lord Selborne, the First Lord of the Admiralty, for the British government in October 1902.

The more the... new German High Seas Fleet is examined, the clearer it becomes that it is designed for a possible conflict with the British Grand Fleet. It cannot be designed for the purpose of playing a leading part in a future war between Germany and France and Russia. A war with France and Russia can only be decided by armies on land.

The race was on!

Germany built their own version of a Dreadnought battleship, called SMS *Rheinland*. Britain and Germany tried to outdo each other by building more and more of these powerful battleships in a dangerous naval race.

By 1914, Germany had doubled the size of its navy and was the second biggest naval power in the world after Great Britain. Britain was suspicious of Germany's motives and so began developing relationships with France and Russia. The arms race* was not just limited to ships and navies. All the European powers were building up their armies and armaments as well.

Your turn!

- 6th 1 Explain how a change in German policy led to the building of HMS *Dreadnought*.
- 7th 2 Read Sources D and E. What different reasons do they give for fearing the change in Germany's policy towards its navy? Is one reason more valid than the other? Discuss this in a group.
- 6th 3 Explain why the naval race began.
- 7th

Source E: From a speech made in parliament by Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, in 1909.

There is no comparison between the importance of the German navy to Germany and the importance of our navy to us. Our navy is to us what their army is to them. To have a strong navy would increase Germany's prestige and influence, but it is not a matter of life and death to them as it is to us.

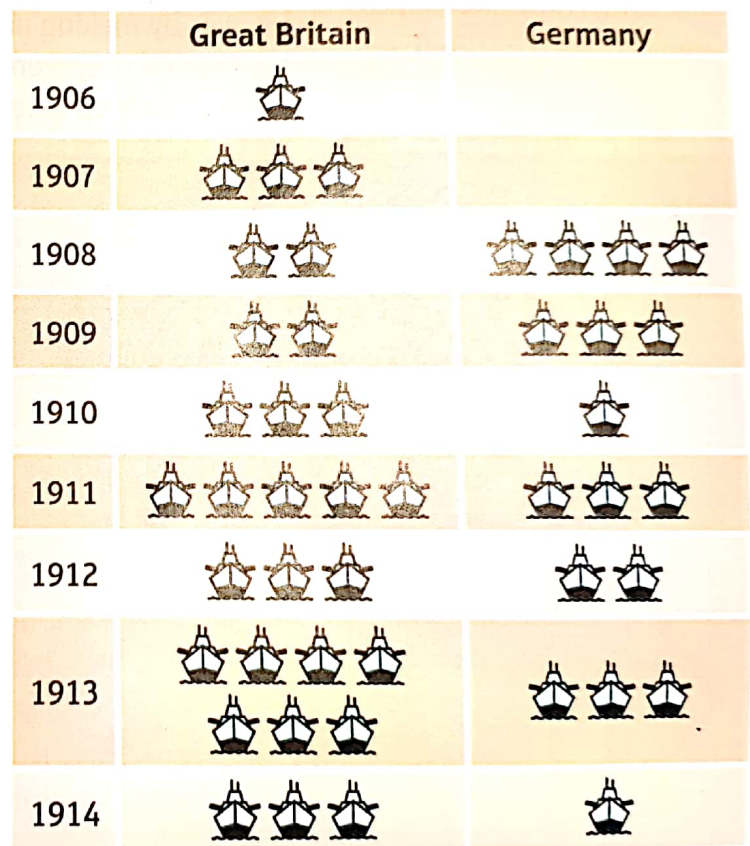


Figure 2.6: The number of Dreadnought-style battleships built by Germany and Great Britain, 1906–14.

Checkpoint

- 1 When were the German Navy Laws and what did they order?
- 2 Give one reason why Germany wanted a navy.
- 3 When was HMS *Dreadnought* launched?
- 4 Give one reason why Britain was alarmed by the growth of Germany's navy.
- 5 What was the naval arms race?