

## CHAPTER I

### GERMAN COLONIZATION IN THE PACIFIC— THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

GERMANY became a colonial power in the Pacific in 1884. While her diplomats in Berlin and London were still protesting to the British Foreign Office that she had no intention of annexing territory or exercising sovereign rights in New Guinea, her cruisers were hoisting the flag there and in the New Britain Archipelago. Bismarck was thus able to forestall any action which Great Britain might sooner or later have taken at the instance of the Australian colonies and New Zealand. Again and again these colonies urged on the Foreign Office the annexation of New Guinea, in order to prevent any other European power from establishing there a base of possibly hostile action. Again and again they had been met with the assurance that no European power contemplated such design, and that a declaration of suzerainty by Great Britain over New Guinea would be an unfriendly act to "a great friendly nation." In its solicitude for Germany's susceptibilities the Imperial Government had disavowed the prescient annexation by Queensland in 1883 of all the non-Dutch part of New Guinea and the adjacent islands. British statesmen, we know now, had their hands full of trouble in Egypt, and relations with France on the one hand and with Germany on the other were in a delicate condition. New Guinea lay far beyond the European horizon; international interest in colonial development was concentrated mainly upon the partition of Africa. Australian aspirations were, therefore, subordinated to the needs of the Empire in another sphere. There were two sides to the question;<sup>1</sup> but to Australians, with their clear realisation of dangers knocking at their door, the lack of interest and the apparent supineness of the Foreign Office with regard to New Guinea appeared as a great betrayal. When, after the annexation by Queensland had been repudiated, Germany promptly took advantage of the blunder and hoisted her flag on the north coast of New Guinea and in the

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<sup>1</sup> See *The Problem of the Commonwealth*, by Lionel Curtis, pp. 75-8

neighbouring archipelago, the Premier of Victoria (James Service) telegraphed to the Foreign Office on 24th December, 1884:—

“The exasperation here is boundless. We protest in the name of the present and future of Australia. If England does not yet save us from the danger and disgrace, as far at least as New Guinea is concerned, the bitterness of feeling towards her will not die out with this generation.”

The hurried proclamation, in October and November, 1884, of a British protectorate over the south coast of New Guinea and over the D'Entrecasteaux and Louisiade groups did little to mollify and reassure the colonies.

Australia's distrust of her new neighbour was well-founded. Germany had acquired territorial interests in New Guinea by sharp practice, and knew that in Australian eyes she was a trespasser. It was obvious that her aim would be to strengthen and consolidate her position. Bismarck's reply to Australian indignation was, according to his biographer,<sup>2</sup> “to deny the right of the Australians to apply the Monroe doctrine to their Polynesian neighbourhood.” He conveniently overlooked the moral claims conferred by British explorations and declarations of annexation, and also the undertaking he had given to Britain that Germany would not exercise suzerainty over New Guinea. Germany, moreover, endeavoured to cover up the traces of Dampier, Carteret, and other British navigators and explorers by changing the geographical names given by them to the islands now under her dominion. Thus the New Britain Archipelago, discovered and named by Dampier in 1700, was in 1885 given the name of Bismarck; New Britain itself became “Neu Pommern,” New Ireland was rechristened “Neu Mecklenburg,” and the Duke of York Islands “Neu Lauenburg.” The German portion of the mainland of New Guinea was named “Kaiser Wilhelm's Land.”

It was always suspected in Australia that Germany's real purpose in New Guinea was the building up of her naval power in the Pacific. New Guinea gave her a base within easy steaming distance of Australia. Her next requirement would be a strategic point from which she could strike at

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Lowe, *Prince Bismarck*, Vol. II, pp 237-8.

New Zealand. This object appeared to be attained when, in 1900, she succeeded in getting control of Samoa. Potential naval stations in the South Pacific were thus assured. In the meantime she had turned her attention to the North Pacific. She wrested Kiaochao from the effete Chinese Government in 1897, and established there at Tsingtao a naval headquarters. In 1899 she purchased from Spain the Caroline, Marshall, Pelew, and Marianne Islands, which formed a useful connecting link between Kiaochao, New Guinea, and Samoa.

It was realised that, side by side with this suspected objective, there went the natural and long-suppressed ambition of Germany to take a major share in the trade and commercial life of the Pacific. It was not to be supposed that a great trading and industrial nation, such as she had now become, would acquiesce in being shut out of the markets of the East and of the South Seas. There was stirring in Germany the desire to become a great colonial power and to take her place in that respect beside Britain and France. As she had come late into this field, she had not the patience to await the slow natural growth and development of her colonies. She felt that she must make up for the lost years. Instead, therefore, of leaving her oversea possessions to go through a pioneer period of stress and experiment—the colonising method adopted by Great Britain—she sought to force their development. She poured liberal subsidies into her African and Pacific possessions. She built imposing towns as the chief seats of administration. Dar-es-Salaam in German East Africa, and Rabaul in New Britain, are trim, well-planned towns with cool, white bungalows and tree-shaded streets. She subsidised steamship services and encouraged tropical agriculture. She enlisted the co-operation of great trading companies, and framed liberal land and economic legislation. The consequence was that her oversea possessions made remarkable progress during the decade immediately before the war. In Samoa the German Trading and Plantation Company not only secured a virtual trade monopoly in Upolu and Savaii, but extended its operations to the Tongan and adjacent groups, and almost killed British competition. In New Guinea three large German trading companies built up

lucrative businesses, and, by financing the smaller planters and traders, lifted the Protectorate to a high pitch of commercial prosperity.

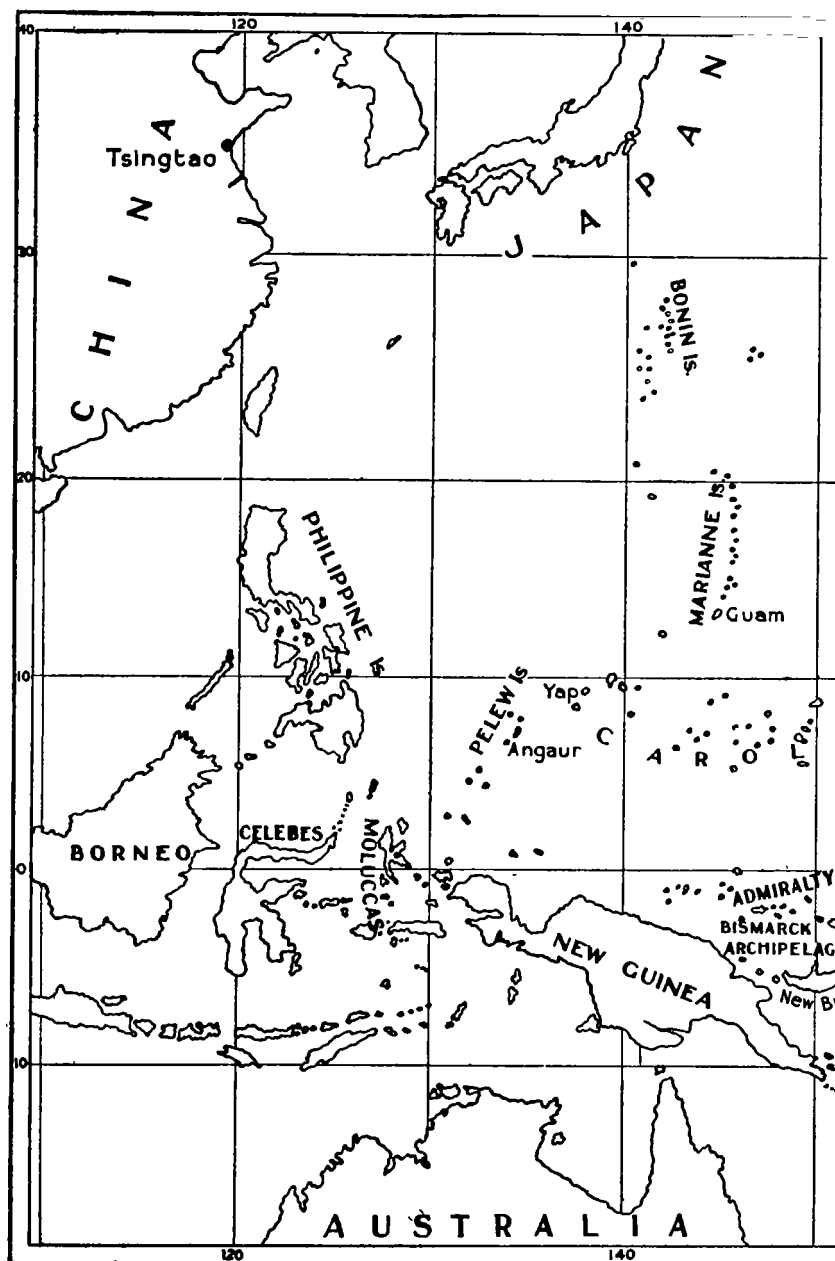
By the year 1914 Germany was an important factor in the trade of the Pacific. And always behind this commercial expansion there was suspected a primary aim—to increase her naval power in the Pacific. The German East Asiatic Squadron had been steadily strengthened. A well-equipped naval base had been established at Tsingtao, which had been fortified and garrisoned; coaling stations existed in the Caroline and Marshall groups, at Rabaul, and at Apia in the Samoan Islands.

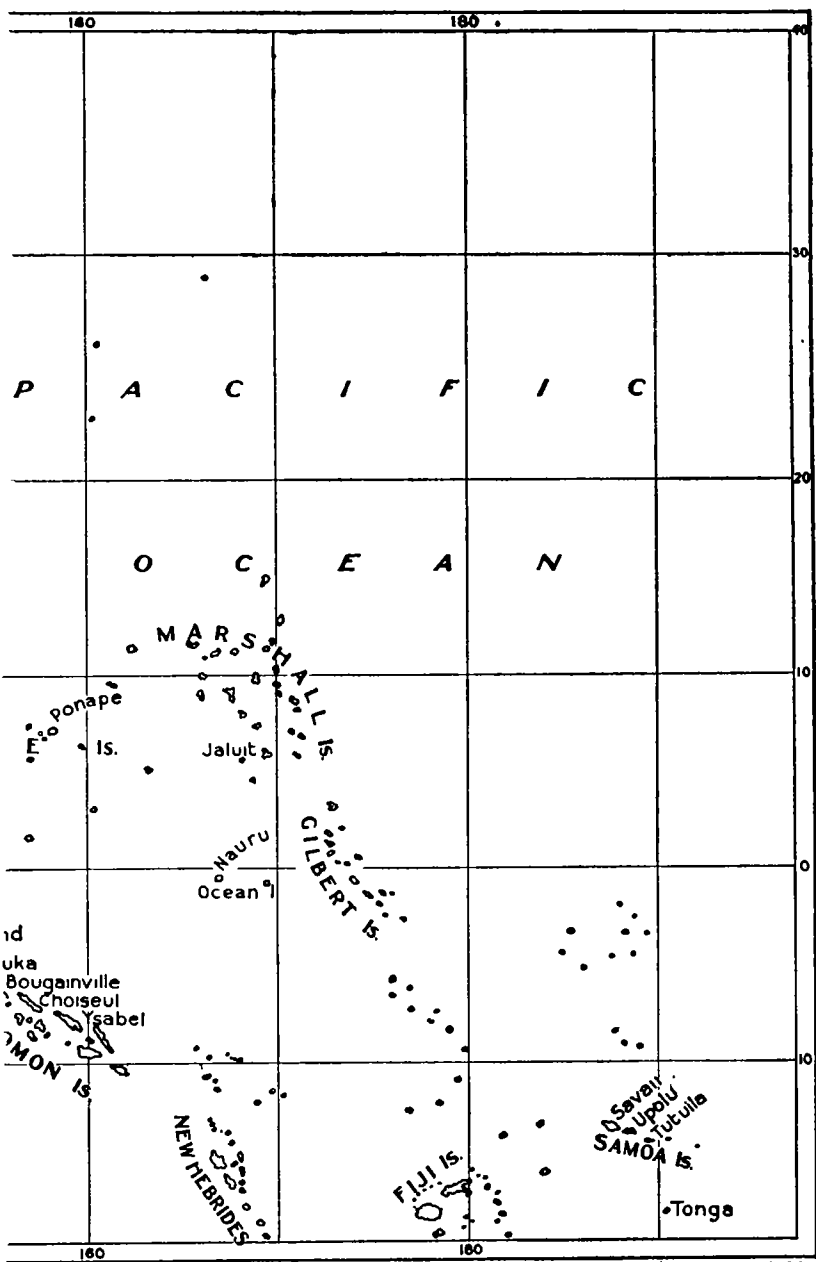
At the commencement of the war, the German squadron in the Pacific comprised the cruisers *Scharnhorst* (the flagship of Rear-Admiral von Spee), *Gneisenau*, *Emden*, *Leipzig*, and *Nürnberg*, together with the small cruisers *Cormoran* and *Geier*. The *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were first-class armoured cruisers with 8.2-inch guns—heavier than those carried by any ship of the Royal Australian Navy except the battle-cruiser *Australia*. The flagship of the Australian fleet was armed with 12-inch guns, but the light cruisers *Sydney*, *Melbourne*, and *Encounter* mounted nothing heavier than 6-inch. The German squadron was therefore a formidable opponent. It had also a reputation for excellent gunnery.

Germany's strategic position in the Pacific was greatly strengthened by a chain of wireless stations erected for the purpose of placing Samoa, Nauru, New Guinea, and the Caroline Islands in communication with naval headquarters at Kiaochao. The erection of these stations brought Apia and Rabaul, outposts in the Pacific, into direct touch with Berlin. The instructions and policy of the Wilhelmstrasse could be communicated within a few hours to the governor of a protectorate in the remotest tropics. In the event of war the value of this chain of stations, working in conjunction with a naval squadron, was incalculable, but had not been realised by the Australian people. A few naval and military officers attached to the General Staff or Intelligence Branch, whose business it was to study these subjects, were aware that Germany had linked up her Pacific possessions with a system of wireless far more complete than the Australian:



# MAP









among the general public the fact was unknown. Six persons out of ten, probably, had never even heard of Rabaul, and most of those who had were under the impression that it was situated on the mainland of New Guinea. Apia was known to most people by name; but few could have confidently indicated the position of Yap (in the Carolines), while about Nauru little was known except by those directly interested in superphosphates. Even to the naval and military authorities in Australia the situation of the wireless station in New Guinea was a secret. Their information led them to believe that it was at Rabaul or in the immediate vicinity. It was in fact thirty-one miles away, by road. Germany had been secretive in regard to both the existence and the strength of these stations. At Nauru, for example, before the outbreak of war only the low-power apparatus had been used in communicating with British ships or stations. Just before the commencement of hostilities a station believed to be Nauru (which had then no call-letters allotted to it) was heard by the wireless station at Melbourne, the calls coming clear and strong. The Melbourne operator asked if Nauru was signalling. An admission of the fact was obtained, but a request for information as to the power of the station was refused. Germany had done her constructional work unobtrusively and effectively: her official secrets had been well guarded.

When, therefore, on the 4th of August, 1914, the nations woke to war, the German possessions in the Pacific became at once factors of great strategic importance. A powerful German fleet was in that ocean; it had bases and coaling facilities at carefully selected points, with which it could communicate by wireless. As long as it remained in the Pacific and could maintain communication with its bases in the islands, it was obvious that the position was one fraught with endless possibilities for Australia and New Zealand. It was inevitable that those countries should be involved in operations against the German possessions. The call came very quickly. Two days after Britain's declaration of war—on August 6th—the Secretary of State for the Colonies despatched to the Governor-General of Australia a cypher telegram from which the following is an extract:

“If your Ministers desire and feel themselves able to seize German wireless stations at Yap in Marshall

Islands,\* Nauru on<sup>†</sup> Pleasant Island, and New Guinea, we should feel that this was a great and urgent Imperial service. You will, however, realise that any territory now occupied must be at the disposal of the Imperial Government for purposes of an ultimate settlement at conclusion of the war. Other Dominions are acting in similar way on the same understanding, in particular, suggestion is being made to New Zealand in regard to Samoa."

It is now known that this proposal, which came—at this stage—as a complete surprise to Australians, was the result of a recommendation by a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence. The Commonwealth Government, though considering that the German squadron should be the first objective, decided to take immediate steps to raise and equip an expeditionary force to proceed to New Guinea. Operations against the wireless stations at Nauru and Yap were also planned. On August 10th a telegram was despatched by the Governor-General intimating that an expeditionary force of 1,500 men was being organised by the Commonwealth Government for the action suggested, and that it would be despatched in a merchant cruiser carrying four 4.7 guns. The departure would be subject to reports from the rear-admiral commanding the Royal Australian Navy, and the Secretary of State would be informed later as to the date on which the force would leave Australia.

On August 18th a further telegram was sent to the Governor-General by the Secretary of State for the Colonies:

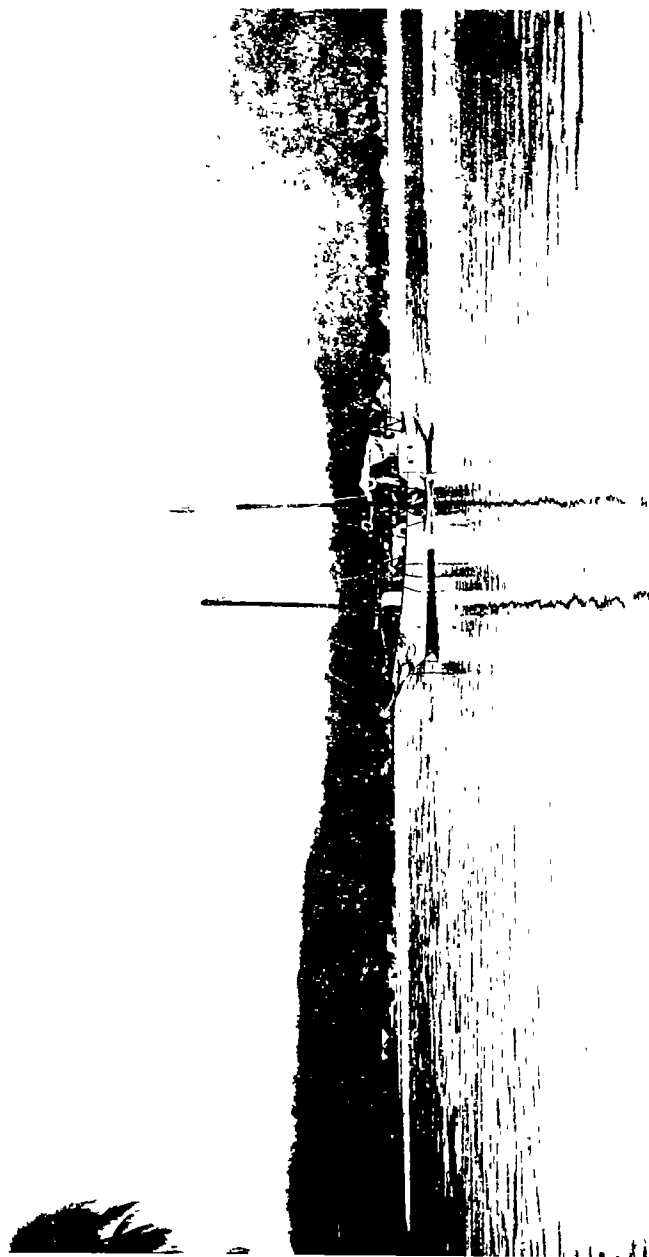
"In connection with the expedition against German possessions in Pacific, British flag should be hoisted in all territories occupied successfully by His Majesty's forces and suitable arrangements made for temporary administration. No formal proclamation of annexation should however be made without previous communication with His Majesty's Government."

This restriction on the annexation of occupied territory was destined to have far-reaching consequences for Australia and New Guinea. But these things lay in the future; the present was brimming with action and big with fate.

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\* Sic: Yap is in the Caroline Islands.

<sup>†</sup> This is the official version. Another version gives "or" for "on".



RABAU, ON SIMPSON HARBOUR, SHOWING A TYPICAL ISLAND SCHOONER

*To face p. 6*

