

# “Six Thousand Tons of Fighting Apparatus”: Canadian Reactions to the Visit of the German Cruiser *Karlsruhe* to Vancouver, March 1935

**Serge M. Durflinger**

*En mars 1935, le croiseur allemand Karlsruhe visita le port de Vancouver. En se basant sur des archives diplomatiques et navales ainsi que de la presse d'époque, cet article examine les réactions gouvernementales, navales, médiatiques, et populaires face à cette visite. Dans un contexte de tensions internationales grandissantes, le séjour de ce navire au Canada constituait un événement inhabituel, controversé et de nature politique. C'était la première fois que les Canadiens se trouvaient en présence de la puissance militaire nazie et les autorités navales canadiennes se sont particulièrement intéressées à la visite de ce navire de guerre. En plus de susciter la curiosité, Karlsruhe et les membres de son équipage symbolisaient et représentaient un régime que la presse canadienne qualifiait de plus en plus comme répressif, déstabilisant et potentiellement dangereux.*

In March 1935 the German light cruiser *Karlsruhe* visited the port of Vancouver. With international tensions growing since the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany two years previously, the ship's stay in Canada proved to be an unusual, controversial, and politically charged event. While the city had from time to time since the end of the First World War played host to British, American, French, and Japanese warships, none of the earlier visits had aroused the same degree of local and national interest as did the arrival of this floating ambassador from Adolf Hitler's Germany. It was Canadians' first occasion to glimpse first hand, on their own soil, the by-then well-known swastika symbols and straight-arm salutes of Germany's growing military establishment. Beyond the curiosity generated by their visit, the vessel and its crew, whatever their personal inclinations, also symbolized and represented a regime increasingly portrayed in the press as repressive, destabilizing, and potentially dangerous.

How did Vancouverites and Canadians generally react to the ship's stay in their midst? What groups opposed or supported the Germans' presence? What was Canadian naval reaction? Which issues dominated press reporting of the visit? This article examines Canadians' official, press, and popular reactions to *Karlsruhe's* visit.

*Karlsruhe*'s was the first in a series of three visits to Canada by German warships during the interwar period: the light cruiser *Emden* visited Montreal in May 1936 and the pre-dreadnought ship-of-the-line *Schlesien* anchored in Halifax in March 1937. But because the inaugural visit to Vancouver set the tone for those that followed, the story of Canadian reactions to German interwar naval visits to Canada must begin here.<sup>1</sup>

It was the first time since before the First World War that a German warship had made a port visit to Canada. In 1905-06 the Imperial German Navy gunboat SMS *Panther* had voyaged to Canadian and American locations on both coasts to scout out safe anchorages for wartime refuelling. In 1907 the cruiser SMS *Bremen* visited Canadian east-coast ports on an intelligence-gathering mission. The following year the cruiser SMS *Freya* performed the same task at Halifax, as did SMS *Viktoria Louise* in 1912, the latter staying two weeks engaging in diplomatic functions as well as conducting intelligence-gathering.<sup>2</sup> *Bremen* visited again in 1911 and 1912, the last trip eliciting some controversy in the press as a result of the heated naval rivalry between Britain and Germany. Despite this, the heavy cruiser SMS *Hertha* spent three weeks in Halifax in the autumn of 1913. Throughout this period the Germans had keenly followed Canadian naval developments and their warship visits served the dual role of enhancing German political prestige and of helping prepare the navy for war against a likely adversary.<sup>3</sup> Although less frequent, the German visits of the 1930s continued in this vein.

*Karlsruhe*'s visit, and the controversy surrounding it, did not prevent the Canadian government from allowing further visits by German warships. *Emden*'s and *Schlesien*'s calls went ahead during periods of sharply deteriorating international conditions. Public concern about the advisability of allowing Nazi warships to visit Canadian ports was outweighed by Ottawa's apparent desire to avoid offending Berlin or trouble relations between the two countries. A review of *Karlsruhe*'s visit shows the Canadian press and public to have been variously curious, suspicious, and hostile to the arrival of a ship from a resurgent and possibly aggressive Germany. The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) took an active professional interest in the visit and sought to glean as much information as it could from the presence of a potentially 'enemy' ship on its doorstep.

On 12 September 1934, the German Consul-General in Canada, Ludwig Kempff, based in Montreal, informed the Canadian government of Germany's desire for a port visit to Vancouver in March 1935 by the light cruiser *Karlsruhe*, during that ship's eight-month international training cruise in the Western Hemisphere. Two weeks later, Ottawa agreed to the request. To allay possible Canadian reticence, given the Hitler regime's increasingly repressive domestic policies, Kempff was quick to point out to O.D. Skelton, Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, that the visit would be merely "informal."

---

<sup>1</sup> A broader article comparing all three visits is being prepared for publication. I would like to thank Chris Madsen and Jan Drent for generously sharing information with me. Chris Madsen's "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: The German Cruiser *Karlsruhe*'s Visit to Vancouver in March 1935," *blurred genres* (winter and spring 1995, University of Victoria History Department), 25-38, focuses on the cruiser's potential as a surface raider and the Royal Canadian Navy's ability to cope with such an eventuality at that time.

<sup>2</sup> Michael L. Hadley and Roger Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships: Canadian Naval Forces and German Sea Raiders, 1880-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 47-49, and 68.

<sup>3</sup> Hadley and Sarty, *Tin-Pots and Pirate Ships*, 64-65, 67, and 70.

“The difference between formal and informal visits,” wrote Kempff, “has been laid down in an agreement between the German, British and other Governments concerned.” He cited the relevant passage: “In the case of formal visits, entertainment under official auspices will be expected and will be returned by the Fleet; in that of informal visits the usual calls of courtesy will be paid in return, but no official entertainment will be expected. Naval visits will be regarded as ... informal when made at the suggestion of the Government to which the ships belong.”<sup>4</sup> In March 1935 Paymaster Captain J.O. Cossette, the Naval Secretary, sent a memorandum to the commander of the naval barracks at Esquimalt, instructing him to make all the arrangements required with local authorities to ensure that the proper courtesies would be extended to the visiting Germans.<sup>5</sup>

As with all three of the interwar visits by German warships to Canada, Kempff concerned himself deeply with the subject of courtesy calls and, in this case, exactly “how Canadian Authorities ... at Vancouver – civilian, naval or military – rank among each other.”<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the “informal” nature of the visits, he was anxious that the highest-possible level of Canadian officials receive the visiting ships’ commanding officers. This would mitigate any public perception that German warships representing the Hitler regime should be treated as international pariahs.

The German consul for western Canada, Heinrich Seelheim, based in Winnipeg since 1930, arrived in Vancouver on 10 March 1935, five days ahead of the ship. He did nothing to allay fears that *Karlsruhe* represented a distasteful and aggressive regime. Seelheim immediately gave an interview to the press about “Germany Today” which, perhaps not surprisingly given his diplomatic role and duties as Berlin’s representative, robustly followed the Nazi Party line. But the vehemence of his language also antagonized some elements of the population. The *Vancouver Daily Province* remarked on Seelheim’s overt “enthusiasm for Hitlerized Germany.”<sup>7</sup> A report of the interview

---

<sup>4</sup> For Ludwig Kempff’s summary of the correspondence see LAC, RG 24, Series D-4, vol. 3788, file “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Kempff to Skelton, 16 November 1934. One of three ships of the Königsberg-class of light cruisers, *Karlsruhe* was commissioned in 1929, displaced 6,550 tons, wielded a principal armament of nine 5.9-inch guns, and had a wartime complement of 820. See David T. Zabecki, ed., *World War II in Europe: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), vol. 2, 918. Interestingly, in 1932, before the coming to power of the Nazis, the governor of Alaska warmly welcomed *Karlsruhe*’s officers at a state ball in Juneau. For photographs of the event, see the Alaska State Archives, at <http://vilda.alaska.edu/>. I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this article for this reference. In February 1935, Kempff further notified Skelton that the oiler *Hansa* would accompany *Karlsruhe*. LAC, “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Kempff to Skelton, 28 February 1935.

<sup>5</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” J.O. Cossette to Commander-in-Charge, Esquimalt, 5 March 1935.

<sup>6</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Kempff to Skelton, 16 November 1934.

<sup>7</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 11 March 1935; Jonathan Wagner, *Brothers Beyond the Sea: National Socialism in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981), 37-41, makes clear that Seelheim’s personal approval of the path on which Hitler had embarked Germany obviously extended well beyond that expected from his diplomatic role. Of Kempff, Wagner, *Brothers Beyond the Sea*, 37, notes that his “inability to identify fully with the National Socialist

prepared by the British Columbia Provincial Police, and sent to the RCN’s commander-in-charge, Esquimalt, described Seelheim’s inflammatory statements as “greatly affecting the local Hebraic community by referring to the German Jews as white slavers and drug traffickers.” In addition, the consul expressed “ill-natured references” toward Catholics.<sup>8</sup> On 20 March, *Karlsruhe*’s last evening in Vancouver, Seelheim delivered a blisteringly anti-Semitic address to the Vancouver chapter of the Lion’s Club. Notwithstanding the existence of anti-Semitism in interwar Canada,<sup>9</sup> some Vancouverites disapproved of the consul’s statements and were politically and morally unwilling to afford the ship a warm welcome.

Because of the left-wing and union demonstrations which had greeted *Karlsruhe* some days earlier during the cruiser’s visit to San Francisco, and because of the wide publicity allotted Hitler’s ruthless policies against Jews, organized labour, and other groups in Germany, the Vancouver press anticipated some vocal protests against the ship’s arrival.<sup>10</sup> Berlin’s announcement on 11 March that Germany had created the *Luftwaffe*, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, did not help matters. This declaration was followed five days later (while *Karlsruhe* was in Vancouver) by Berlin’s further public admission that conscription was beginning anew in Germany. Still, the Vancouver *Province* pejoratively branded any likely protesters in Vancouver as “Communists.” As Seelheim stated: “The *Karlsruhe* is coming here ... with the full consent of the Canadian ... government. The Communists hate us, and I suppose they have reason to, because in Germany we crushed them. We hate the Communists ... but for Canada and every other country we have the most cordial feelings. We ask nothing except to be understood ... We have no secrets and nothing to hide.” Moreover, the ship’s impending arrival instilled pride among many in the German communities of western Canada and the US Pacific northwest. A number of enthusiastic “excursionists” from prairie communities as well as a contingent from Seattle were reportedly planning to be present dockside to greet the

---

revolution and the people associated with it was well known and not appreciated by [Nazi] Party zealots either in Germany or Canada.”

<sup>8</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Memorandum by Thomas W.S. Parsons, Assistant Commissioner, British Columbia Provincial Police to [Royal Canadian Navy] Commander, Esquimalt, 20 March 1935.

<sup>9</sup> Wagner, *Brothers Beyond the Sea*, 39. On Canadian anti-Semitism, see Irving Abella and Harold Troper, *None is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Dennys, 1982), and Janine Stingel, *Social Discredit: Anti-Semitism, Social Credit, and the Jewish Response* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> For the ship’s reception in San Francisco, see the oral history interview of Samuel Darcy, the American communist organizer of the anti-*Karlsruhe* demonstrations there at [www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv9n1/darcy.htm](http://www.revolutionarydemocracy.org/rdv9n1/darcy.htm). It should be noted that the published diary of Erich Topp, a German officer-cadet aboard *Karlsruhe* at the time, suggests a warmer welcome in San Francisco, with only a few epithets hurled the German sailors’ way. See Erich Topp, *The Odyssey of a U-Boat Commander* (translated by Eric C. Rust) (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 1992), 36-37, originally published as *Fackeln über dem Atlantik: Lebensbericht eines U-Boot-Kommandanten* (Herford and Bonn: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1990).

vessel.<sup>11</sup> There was evidently no shortage of patriotic Germans living in Vancouver willing to extend a warm welcome to the cruiser. In fact, one scholar has suggested that the city was home to “one of the most openly active pro-Nazi” chapters of the *Deutscher Bund* in Canada and that many of the Germans lived in a single neighbourhood dubbed “Naziburg” by locals.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, according to historian Jonathan Wagner, if Germans living abroad could not be induced to return to Germany, the Nazis “sought to proselytize among their far-flung racial brothers and sisters and transform them into National Socialist supporters abroad.”<sup>13</sup> And in this role, a warship could prove an excellent ambassador; *Karlsruhe* already had been spreading this message among German immigrants in Brazil, Chile, and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The Vancouver Half Company of the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) also prepared for *Karlsruhe*'s impending arrival. In the absence of a German consul in the city, Seelheim asked H.W. Mahler, the resident Hamburg-America Line and North German Lloyd Line passenger agent, and a British subject, to temporarily fill that role. In January 1935, Mahler contacted Lieutenant H.R. Wade, RCNVR, Commanding Officer of the Vancouver Half Company, to inquire about the possibility of entertaining *Karlsruhe*'s officers. The amenable Wade was also a member of the Naval Officers' Association of British Columbia (NOA) and the Navy League of Canada. In February 1935 Wade attended a planning meeting held by German community groups wishing to help entertain the ship's officers. He left impressed by the local Germans' level of organization and commitment to supporting *Karlsruhe* while the ship was in Vancouver.<sup>15</sup>

The Naval Officers' Association arranged a dinner for *Karlsruhe*'s officers and Lieutenant Wade designated an RCNVR officer, Lieutenant C.E. Donaldson, who was also the secretary of the NOA, to serve as a liaison between the Germans' organizing committee and the NOA. Presumably, Wade further tasked his subordinate with closely monitoring those individuals organizing receptions for the crew and, judging from Donaldson's report of his liaison duties and activities, of observing the vessel's technical features, crew efficiency, shipboard morale, and the degree to which the German sailors

---

<sup>11</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 11 March 1935. See also J. Noakes and G. Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919-1945: A Documentary Reader*, vol. 3 (Exeter: University of Exeter Publications, 1988), 663.

<sup>12</sup> John Offenbeck, “The Nazi Movement and German Canadians, 1933-1939” (MA Thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1971), 79.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada, 1850-1939* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2006), 178.

<sup>14</sup> Topp, *Odyssey of a U-Boat Commander*, 27-36. Midshipman Topp was obviously proud and enthused by his naval mission and the military resurgence of his country. He told one American in Los Angeles that “Hitler had almost 100 per cent of the German people behind him.” Topp, 35.

<sup>15</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Confidential Report, “Re: Visit of German Cruiser ‘Karlsruhe’ to Vancouver,” Lieutenant H.R. Wade, RCNVR, Company Commanding Officer, Vancouver Half Company to the Commander-in-Charge, RCN Barracks, Esquimalt, 27 March 1935 (hereafter Wade Report). Mahler was formally appointed Honorary German Consul in Vancouver in November 1935. See LAC, RG 25, vol. 1726, file 26-V, “Appointment of H.W. Mahler as Consul in Vancouver”, and Bruce Ramsey, *A History of the German-Canadians in British Columbia* (Winnipeg: National Publishers, 1958), 58-59.

seemed loyal to the Nazi cause. It appears Donaldson’s assignment originated with a “suggestion” from the commander-in-charge, Esquimalt.<sup>16</sup> Donaldson’s fascinating five-page report reveals an earnest, if amateurish, approach to intelligence gathering and a deeper desire to understand the political motives and military determination of men against whom the Canadian navy might be required to give battle in the not-so-distant future.

Donaldson felt that *Karlsruhe*’s visit had three objectives: first, to assess Canadian popular reaction to the Hitler regime and to gauge the “loyalty of Canada to the Empire and her position to Great Britain should [the latter] at any time resort to strength of arms.” Secondly, “by diplomacy and personal contact with the citizens to establish a friendlier feeling toward Germany for the stimulation of trade.” Thirdly, “by the presence of the ship, to overcome in their own nationals [residing in Canada] any apathy, and if possible, antipathy to the Nazi regime.” While perhaps assigning a more structured meaning to the visit than even the Germans intended, Donaldson’s views nevertheless are indicative of some early Canadian naval reactions and concerns about Hitler’s Germany in the interwar period. His opinions are partly borne out by Midshipman Erich Topp, who served aboard *Karlsruhe* at the time of the cruiser’s visit to Vancouver. In his memoirs, based on diaries he kept during the voyage, Topp notes that one of the aims of the training cruise was for the ship to serve as a visible, impressive reminder of an assertive German Reich: “the cruise ... acquainted us with foreign peoples, customs, and cultures and made us representatives and ambassadors of the new Germany.” In October 1934, near the beginning of the ship’s voyage, Hitler sent the following message to the vessel: “I expect that the Karlsruhe will, in true devotion to her duties, represent the honour of Germany on her trip abroad.”<sup>17</sup> The cruise was about showcasing the ‘new’ Germany as much as crew training.

Donaldson described Vancouverites’ responses to the news of the ship’s upcoming visit: “When the official announcement ... was made the three local papers were deluged by letters for and against ... It was the main topic of conversation for some weeks with opinion evenly divided, until two alleged women spies were executed [in Germany]. After that public opinion was 70 per cent against receiving the ship. This estimate is based on conversations with many different classes of society. A strong anti-Nazi campaign was conducted by a society called the Canadian League Against War and Fascism.” But Donaldson was surprised that the local German communists decided not to

---

<sup>16</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Confidential Report, “Visit of German Cruiser ‘Karlsruhe’ to Vancouver,” Lieutenant C.E. Donaldson, RCNVR, Vancouver Half Company to the Company Commanding Officer, Vancouver Half Company, RCNVR, 26 March 1935 (hereafter Donaldson Report).

<sup>17</sup> Topp, 43-44 and 26. What the Germans thought of Canada is beyond the scope of this article. However, a hint might be found in a passage Kempff wrote in 1926: “Canada for most Germans, including the educated ones, remained little more than a geographic expression synonymous with huge stretches of forest, wilderness, and the absence of culture.” Quoted in Wagner, *A History of Migration from Germany to Canada*, 175.

protest for the “good of the ‘Fatherland’.”<sup>18</sup> Such was the pull of interwar German patriotism, even among some left-wing groups.

As the day approached, Vancouverites eagerly, but perhaps warily, awaited *Karlsruhe*'s arrival – if press accounts can serve as a guide. For example, the *Vancouver Daily Province* of 7 March 1935 ran a front-page photo of the ship under the headline: “German Cruiser Coming.” Perhaps adding a foretaste of what Vancouverites might expect, this newspaper reminded readers that anti-Hitler protests had marked the vessel's stay in San Francisco and that “several organizations in Vancouver have protested against the cruiser's proposed visit.” Two days before the ship arrived, the same newspaper carried a front-page photo of Captain Günther Lütjens, the ship's commander, beneath which appeared a brief synopsis of his naval career.<sup>19</sup> Readers also learned that municipal authorities would spend the same amount to entertain the German crew as had been spent to entertain those aboard the French training cruiser *Jeanne d'Arc* that January. City council had voted exactly \$184 to offer a reception for all members of *Karlsruhe*'s crew and host the ship's commander at a civic dinner at the Hotel Vancouver on 19 March.<sup>20</sup>

On 14 March *Karlsruhe* dutifully exchanged gun salutes with shore batteries at Victoria<sup>21</sup> and on the morning of Friday, 15 March, arrived in Vancouver for a one-week visit. Aboard were some 500 officers, crew, midshipmen, and three Nazi Party officials. The ship had stayed in English Bay overnight and passed beneath the Lion's Gate Bridge at 9:40 a.m. The *Province* published a dramatic front-page photo of the ship gliding into harbour, sailors lining its rails, with the ship's band playing martial airs. *Karlsruhe* flew the red, white, and black German naval ensign with an iron cross in the centre. The *Province* gushed in a very positive article that the ship was nothing less than “6,000 tons of fighting apparatus.” Perhaps as a precaution against protesters, the vessel anchored in Burrard Inlet, only to secure alongside the next morning. Vancouver's mayor, Gerald McGeer, and the German consul, Seelheim, were present to welcome the vessel. Seelheim, Lieutenant Wade, and shipping agent Mahler made up the first party of dignitaries to board *Karlsruhe*, shuttled to and fro in the cruiser's pinnace. Then a stream of boats took out various others, including members of the press. The *Province* dutifully reported that the main purpose of the ship's cruise – “besides showing the German flag” – was the training of shipboard personnel, especially that of the more than one hundred and twenty midshipmen aboard.<sup>22</sup>

The *Province*'s reporting that day scrupulously avoided any mention of the protests which had also greeted the ship. Some Vancouverites were angry that a symbol of Nazi power had arrived in their midst. Emanating from the large crowd present to greet the ship was some sustained, scattered booning, most evident when Captain Lütjens came ashore. Midshipman Topp noted in his diary: “The pier is filled with waiting people, but

---

<sup>18</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report.

<sup>19</sup> During the Second World War, Lütjens, as a fleet admiral, commanded operation “Rhine,” the breakout into the Atlantic of the German battleship *Bismarck* and the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. He was lost when *Bismarck* was sunk on 27 May 1941.

<sup>20</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 13 March 1935.

<sup>21</sup> Madsen, “A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing,” 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 15 and 16 March 1935.

they do not wave. The city gives us a peculiar welcome.” Another source suggests that *Karlsruhe* received a “courteous ... but trifle aloof welcome.”<sup>23</sup>

According to Donaldson, the Canadian Pacific Railway and Canadian National Railways refused to place their dock spaces at the ship’s disposal, “fearing disturbances.” Yet, to the annoyance of the German consul, Seelheim, the CPR had granted a berth to *Jeanne d’Arc* only two months earlier. Implying a clear propaganda motive to the Germans’ port visit, Donaldson noted that local Germans and consular officials “were annoyed that the *Jeanne d’Arc* had called here first and did everything possible to out-do that ship’s entertainment.” The Germans enjoyed some success, since Donaldson also stated in his report that “*Karlsruhe* did far more entertaining than any ship which has visited this port.”<sup>24</sup> The officers and crew were also in great demand by various groups in the city and were able to participate in a number of lunches, receptions, and sight-seeing tours organized in their honour by the Seamen’s Institute, the Rotary Club, the Army and Navy Veterans, the Royal Vancouver Yacht Club, and the Vancouver Board of Trade, among others. The popular ship’s band even played for a radio audience. *Karlsruhe*, too, welcomed a variety of local dignitaries for receptions aboard the vessel.<sup>25</sup>

Protocol was a delicate and important matter, as much for the Canadian government and navy as it was for Consul-General Kempff and the German navy. Who, exactly, was to pay a courtesy call to whom? This was a question federal authorities needed to handle deftly and Ottawa acted hesitatingly, not wishing either to be too strongly identified with the ship’s controversial symbolism or to offend the German visitors. In the end, given the non-official nature of the visit, Lütjens called on the mayor, who returned the call the same day, but did not call on Lieutenant-Governor John William Fordham Johnson or Premier T.D. Pattullo, though after the ship had left, “it was gathered this would have been expected.” The federal minister of Agriculture, Robert Weir, represented Ottawa in paying a courtesy call to Lütjens aboard the cruiser.<sup>26</sup>

On the crew’s first evening ashore, at a dance and reception at Moose Hall hosted by the city’s German community, demonstrators clashed violently with police, who were on hand in force to protect the Germans’ festivities. “Rocks Fly at Welcome to Germans: Communist Agitators Jeer as Cruiser’s Sailors enter Hall,” blared the *Province* the next day. The rock throwing deteriorated into a “general melee ... the police proving the victors,” as mounted police and some on foot charged the demonstrators, which the *Province* described as a “mob.” At the height of the Great Depression, Vancouver at this time was dealing with constant and bitter labour strife and agitation, unemployed

---

<sup>23</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report; Topp, 37; Ramsey, *A History of the German-Canadians in British Columbia*, 58-59.

<sup>24</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report.

<sup>25</sup> Information derived from *Vancouver Daily Province*, 13 to 20 March 1935.

<sup>26</sup> LAC, RG 25, G-1, Vol. 1728, file 1935-53-BY, “Visit to Canada of German Cruiser ‘Emden’,” “Visit of the German Cruiser ‘Emden’ to Montreal May 12th-18<sup>th</sup>,” unsigned confidential “Memorandum for the Prime Minister,” probably O.D. Skelton to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, 13 December 1935. The Minister of Agriculture reported back that the Lieutenant-Governor and Premier “would have appreciated a visit.” Untitled and unaddressed memorandum, 16 January 1936.

workers' anger, and a large number of demonstrations, some of them violent. The left-wing protesters opposed to *Karlsruhe's* visit broke a number of windows at the hall and a neon sign was damaged. Police made two arrests. The German crew was reported to be "unimpressed by the anti-Nazi demonstration." Lieutenant Harold Grosse, the ship's press liaison officer, noted that none of the Germans were involved in the disturbance. "It was nothing," stated Grosse, downplaying the incident. Once inside, according to the newspaper account, the "sons of the Fatherland" apparently enjoyed themselves immensely.<sup>27</sup>

However, in his diary, Topp noted: "On its way to Moose Hall, where the German colony has organized a reception, our delegation meets angry crowds and vociferous protest. The police are barely able to escort us safely to the place. It reminds me of the situation in Germany just a few years ago. We see faces ... distorted by deep hatred. This burning fury ... is the product of local press reports that characterize us as representatives of the Nazi regime, a political system allegedly responsible for the degradation of workers, for the brutal execution of innocent women, for the suppression of any form of humanitarian principles."<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, and hardly co-incidentally, adjacent to the reporting of the unpleasantities at Moose Hall the *Province* ran a more ominous story: "Hitler Rocks Europe by Raising Army and Renouncing Treaty," blared the headline, accompanied by a caricature of a gesticulating Hitler. Accordingly, Vancouverites were able to juxtapose the raucous events in their city spawned by the *Karlsruhe's* visit with the growing sense that the ship and crew *did*, after all, represent a dangerous and erratic regime.

Five days later, in an ill-advised move, the ship's captain, Lütjens, laid a wreath at the cenotaph in downtown Victory Square. Seelheim was present as was Colonel W.W. Foster, first vice-president of the Dominion Command of the Canadian Legion. "The ceremony took place so quietly that it was over before passers-by realized what had transpired," reported the *Province*, while "crowds pressed forward to see the tribute from the German ship."<sup>29</sup> But some people did not like the idea of Nazis honouring Canada's war dead. Later that evening, the lone constable on duty in the square was confronted by "a crowd of men ... marching in military formation." Numbering about 100, the furious demonstrators, organized by local communists and consisting at least in part of unemployed men, announced their intention of removing the Germans' wreath. More police arrived and a scuffle broke out. The crowd was dispersed but not before the wreath had been removed and later recovered by police. There were three arrests.<sup>30</sup>

"These were the only unpleasant incidents" during the ship's stay, wrote Lieutenant Donaldson, matter-of-factly. But there were other gaffes. Donaldson admitted that it was an "error in judgement" for Captain Lütjens to have "presented medals to

---

<sup>27</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 16 March 1935. For the tense situation in Vancouver at this time, see David Ricardo Williams, *Mayor Gerry: the Remarkable Career of Gerald Grattan McGeer* (Vancouver: Douglas and Macintyre, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> Topp, 37. Topp was clearly unimpressed with his Canadian port-of-call, allotting it by far the shortest and least colourful of his diary entries for this period.

<sup>29</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 20 March 1935.

<sup>30</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 21 March 1935.

German War Veterans living in Vancouver at a Public Dance ashore [at Moose Hall]. This was very tactless and aroused public sentiment, as there is no doubt that this ceremony should have been held aboard ship.”<sup>31</sup> Evidently, some Vancouverites were offended by the use of Canadian territory for such an occasion and considered it an insult to Canada’s war dead. On the other hand, there were no protests when, on Sunday, 17 March, *Karlsruhe* marked *Volkstrauertag*, a day in honour of Germany’s war dead.<sup>32</sup>

Certainly Vancouverites took an interest in the ship and “only a very few of the enormous crowd which endeavoured to visit the *Karlsruhe* ... succeeded in getting aboard.”<sup>33</sup> Topp has recalled one unfortunate and frightening incident occurring Sunday, 17 March, during which a crowd-control barrier alongside part of the ship was mistakenly opened, causing a crush of visitors to scramble to get aboard by means of an unguarded gangway. “The guard on duty at the gangway is overwhelmed by the onslaught. Six more men are sent to assist him. Linking arms, we form a semicircle around the gangway and use all our strength to keep the crowd from [rushing] ahead. The people keep up the pressure. Women faint, children cry and are passed forward, half crushed ... The Canadian police try to help out but with little effect.” Although the Germans cancelled further visits that day, an estimated 5,000 people visited the ship the next day while thousands of others observed the vessel from dockside. Many among them reportedly were members of the German community.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the violent incidents marring the ship’s time in port, Donaldson felt that the vessel had made a very good impression on the local German community and most Vancouverites. Donaldson interviewed locals who had been “antagonistic” towards the ship’s visit and whose opinions had been tempered by what they had seen and heard upon actually visiting *Karlsruhe* and mixing with its crew. Some among the city’s German and non-German communities believed that the press was exaggerating in its reporting of the “reign of terror” in Germany. “I am sure that the average citizen feels more kindly disposed toward Germany in spite of the recent disturbing statements from Herr Hitler,” wrote Donaldson after the ship’s departure. He further stated, “I am confident also that German citizens here have been swayed toward the Nazi cause.” *Karlsruhe*’s visit was clearly an important and positive event for most local Germans. The whole affair smacked of propaganda and publicity seeking, of course, and Donaldson reported that “one feels that [*Karlsruhe*’s] entire Ship’s Company was specially selected for the purpose of this cruise” and that it was “obvious that the Officers had been instructed to be on their very best behaviour.” Midshipman Topp, however, felt that the ship’s crew, himself included, had been improperly trained for their meetings with locals on foreign ports-of-call and that they did “not always live up to” the intent of their naval-diplomatic functions. “We rarely established real contact with foreign nationals,” he wrote, “because of our obligations towards the local German colonies ... We simply lacked the basis to

---

<sup>31</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report. See also “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” Parsons to Commander, Esquimalt, 20 March 1935.

<sup>32</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 16 March 1935, noted the ship was being solemnly prepared for the occasion and subsequently reported no more about it.

<sup>33</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” undated, unsigned report.

<sup>34</sup> Topp, 37; *Vancouver Daily Province*, 19 and 20 March 1935.

learn about and assess the various economies, customs, and cultures in a proper way.” His felt that the anti-German North American press “distorted” Germany’s true image and as a result “our efforts to clarify the record had to remain limited.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Donaldson overestimated the Germans’ desire and ability to glean information about Canada and Canadians.

Ever on the lookout for evidence of disloyalty on the part of Vancouver’s German community, Donaldson carefully compiled a list of people whom the German consul, Seelheim, termed “good Germans.” Among the more worrisome to Donaldson were E. Alleweldt, a First World War German naval officer, and a commander in the German naval reserve, and Count von Arnim, who lived on Lasqueti Island, in the Strait of Georgia. Canadian naval authorities sought to be as informed as possible about potentially subversive elements in their bailiwick, no matter how remote the threat.

Some prominent Vancouverites appeared supportive of the Germans’ presence in harbour and perhaps even, to a limited extent, to some of Berlin’s world views. A 17 March front-page report in the *Province* (carefully placed next to an article describing the systematic arrests of 1,000 German priests), detailed Consul Seelheim’s strongly-worded ‘party-line’ speech to the members of the Canadian Club at the Hotel Vancouver. He was much applauded for his efforts in defending the Nazis’ foreign and domestic policies. Lütjens and other ship’s officers were also present. “Speaking with a heavy accent,” Lütjens thanked the citizens of Vancouver for their “hospitality and comradeship” and expressed the hope that peace would characterize future relations between Canada and Germany. “The German officers who attended the luncheon added a dramatic touch when they stood with their right arms raised during the singing of ‘God Save the King’,” reported the *Province*.<sup>36</sup>

On 18 March the Canadian Corps Association, probably second only to the Canadian Legion among the Dominion’s veterans’ organizations, hosted a luncheon for the ship’s officers. That evening the Naval Officers’ Association gave a dinner in its wardroom for the officers of the German ship at which time, according to Donaldson, the guests were finally able to “relax.” The president of the association proposed but two toasts: “The King” and “the German Navy.” No toasts were offered to Germany or the German chancellor, Hitler, as protocol might have dictated, and it seems some of the Germans present “quietly questioned” the Canadian naval officers about this apparent slight. Lütjens’s reply to the toast was “Should war ever come again, it is our hope that Germany and Britain will be allies. This would be more natural as we both come from the same stock.”<sup>37</sup> The Germans were extremely sensitive to any insults, intended or otherwise, against the Hitler regime and took pains to ensure that they were perceived as representing the ‘new’ Germany. For example, Lieutenant Donaldson was able to borrow a German naval ensign from *Karlsruhe* for display during the dinner at the NOA, although, according to Donaldson’s report, the German signal officer insisted that he could have it only if the swastika flag was displayed at the same time. Both flags were

---

<sup>35</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report; Topp, 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 18 March 1935.

<sup>37</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report.

accepted as representing the Reich at this time and the Canadians accepted this condition without protest.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, because the German national anthem was played “on every occasion ashore,”<sup>39</sup> all German officers and naval cadets present gave the Nazi salute, as they were obliged to do by regulations – a practice frequently referred to in press accounts as well as in Donaldson’s report and no doubt the source of bemusement and perhaps even fascination to Canadians. Donaldson spent a considerable amount of time aboard the German vessel. He noted that photographs of Hitler appeared throughout the ship and that, on entering the wardroom, every officer formally saluted one. “This seems overdone,” he wrote. He further noted dryly that “their wardroom stewards all spoke English and were rather obvious in listening to civilian conversations whenever possible.”<sup>40</sup> Yet, according to Donaldson, the Vancouver police retained the services of a German-speaking former RCMP constable to “trace anti-Nazi connections between the ship and the shore. It is thought that there is a secret anti-Nazi group in the ship.” While this is difficult to confirm, and perhaps doubtful, it is also true that several German officers continued to wear cuff links bearing the old imperial coat-of-arms. Topp noted that in celebrating the anniversary of the Battle of Jutland while homeward bound in the Atlantic, “the old and our new service flags are hoisted together, symbolizing the common attitude and spirit that unite the former and the new Navy.”<sup>41</sup> This might indicate shipboard divisions as much as unity. Whatever the case, the Canadian navy hoped to gauge the Germans’ morale and level of commitment to the Hitler regime.

Satisfied by the RCNVR’s stab at intelligence gathering, Lieutenant Wade, commanding the Vancouver Half Company, forwarded Donaldson’s report to Esquimalt. He attached his own three pages of comments and labelled Donaldson’s report “comprehensive” and a document with which he “concur.” Wade was exceedingly complimentary towards the Germans who impressed him with their cordial efficiency and alert, diplomatic statements. Most of the cruiser’s officers spoke English and Wade had had an opportunity of speaking confidentially to the ship’s paymaster. “He explained that the present Nazi regime was an absolute necessity to preserve the life of the nation ... that no one could hope to keep a proud and ambitious people down for any considerable length of time.” The German also mentioned approvingly the secret rebuilding of the *Luftwaffe* and the likelihood of Germany eventually moving towards the east, but not against France. He also raised the inevitability of a union with Austria.<sup>42</sup> For Wade, the German naval officer corps was stridently patriotic and firmly supportive of Nazi ideology.

Few observers, including Donaldson, suggested anything of military value could be gleaned from the ship’s visit. One anonymous report noted that “everything of real interest was carefully hidden from view.” After running through some of the particulars

---

<sup>38</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report.

<sup>39</sup> It is not clear if “*Leid der Deutschen*” or the equally official Nazi-Party anthem, the “*Horst Wessel Lied*” was played.

<sup>40</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report.

<sup>41</sup> LAC, Donaldson Report; Topp, 42.

<sup>42</sup> LAC, Wade Report.

of the vessel, the author of this report stated that the ship “lies low in the water – especially aft – and would not present much of a target at long range.”<sup>43</sup> This was not exactly high-grade intelligence.

Fully replenished from its accompanying oiler, *Hansa*, which had arrived on 19 March, *Karlsruhe* left Vancouver at 9:00 a.m. on 21 March 1935, with the ship’s band playing “O Canada” as a farewell gesture. Six hundred people turned out for the send-off, with thousands of others gathering at different vantage points, many in Stanley Park, to bid the cruiser *adieu*. The ship was returning to Germany with further stops in Acapulco, Colon, Houston, and Charleston.<sup>44</sup> The visit had been controversial and highly charged, made worse by Berlin’s co-incident repudiation of the Treaty of Versailles and a sense of deepening international crisis.

Despite the troubles which had marred the Germans’ time in Vancouver, and the fact that Canadians in general were obviously wary of the Hitler regime, the country’s ports had not yet seen the last of German warships in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War. Only six months later, and with barely a thought or dissentient opinion, Ottawa calmly agreed to allow the training cruiser *Emden* to pay a visit to Montreal in May 1936.<sup>45</sup> O.D. Skelton passed the request on to various government departments and agencies for comment and the experiences of *Karlsruhe*’s stay in Vancouver were apparently not considered in preparing a reply to Kempff. Any impact the ship’s visit had had in Canada was clearly short-lived. In fact, Major-General L.R. LaFlèche, deputy minister of National Defence, even needed to remind Skelton of *Karlsruhe*’s visit.<sup>46</sup> However, as news of *Emden*’s visit was announced in the spring of 1936, some members of the public – mainly labour groups – did object, as they had with the visit of *Karlsruhe*. *Emden*’s six-day visit to Montreal went ahead, with the same consequences as that of *Karlsruhe* the year before: hundreds of protesters to greet the ship, general delight among the German expatriate colony, and an enthusiastic response from curious Montrealers seeking to board the vessel – perhaps, like Vancouverites the year previously, to see what all the fuss was about.

---

<sup>43</sup> “Visit of German Cruiser Karlsruhe,” undated, unsigned report. In fact, this class of cruiser was not especially successful and certainly not known for its seakeeping qualities.

<sup>44</sup> *Vancouver Daily Province*, 18 and 21 March 1935. *Karlsruhe* was sunk by a British submarine on 9 April 1940 during the German invasion of Norway.

<sup>45</sup> LAC, “Visit to Canada of German Cruiser Emden,” Kempff to Skelton, 23 September 1935 and reply 28 September 1935.

<sup>46</sup> “Visit to Canada of German Cruiser ‘Emden’,” L.R. LaFlèche to Skelton, 26 September 1935 and exchange of correspondence between them of 26 February and 4 March 1936.