

**THE TRANSVAAL QUESTION AND GERMAN–BRITISH DIPLOMATIC
RELATIONS IN 1895–1896.**

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Abstract

This article analyzes the escalation of German–British relations in 1895–1896, focusing on the Transvaal question as a central issue. It draws on diplomatic documents by von Marschall and correspondence involving Kaiser Wilhelm II to examine the political and economic interests of both powers. Germany emphasized maintaining the status quo and protecting its economic interests, while Britain viewed German actions as a strategic threat.

Keywords

Transvaal, German-British relations, 1895–1896 diplomacy, colonial rivalry, Kaiser Wilhelm II, von Marschall, Krüger Telegram, status quo, Triple Alliance, British Empire, South African Republic, imperial competition, European diplomacy, Eastern Question, Mediterranean policy

By the end of the 19th century, competition among European powers intensified not only within Europe but also in colonial territories. In particular, the issue of the Transvaal Republic in Southern Africa became a central point of diplomatic tension between Germany and Great Britain. This article analyzes the political confrontation between the two states on the basis of documents written in 1895 by Baron von Marschall, State Secretary of the German Foreign Office. According to the 1884 convention, Transvaal (the South African Republic) was recognized as a semi-independent state with certain limitations. However, Great Britain sought to maintain it within its sphere of influence. Germany, for its part, had economic interests in the region, especially in railway construction and the development of trade relations. As noted by von Marschall, German policy was aimed at preserving the economic independence of Transvaal, which was viewed with suspicion by Britain. The document dated February 1, 1895 reflects a diplomatic exchange between German and British representatives. The British side accused Germany of fostering anti-British sentiment in Transvaal. However, von Marschall rejected these accusations, emphasizing that no concrete evidence had been provided.

In his view, Germany was not engaging in any “political game” with Transvaal, the country was merely protecting its own economic interests, and Transvaal had the right to act as an independent state. In this context, Germany justified its policy as one aimed at preserving the status quo. One of the significant developments in European diplomacy in 1895–1896 was the intensification of relations between Germany and Great Britain. This process was particularly evident in issues related to the Transvaal Republic in Southern Africa. At that time, Transvaal was strategically and economically important, and the interests of major powers clashed around it. The diplomatic correspondence recorded in 1895 by Baron von Marschall, State Secretary of the German Foreign Office, serves as an important historical source for understanding the essence of these confrontations. According to the 1884 convention, Transvaal was recognized as a semi-independent state, although Britain sought to retain control over its foreign policy. Germany, on the other hand, had economic interests in the region and aimed to expand its influence through railway construction and trade relations. This factor was perceived with

concern by Britain, leading to accusations that German policy was encouraging anti-British sentiment in Transvaal. In the negotiations recorded by von Marschall, the German side firmly rejected these accusations. In their view, Germany had not pursued any hostile policy but had merely defended its economic interests. Germany regarded Transvaal as an independent state and recognized its right to establish international relations that it considered beneficial. From this perspective, German policy was presented as one aimed at maintaining the existing situation, that is, the status quo.

However, the British side approached the issue differently. In their view, Germany, by drawing closer to Transvaal, was encouraging anti-British sentiment there and providing political support to the Boers. In particular, Transvaal was considered strategically important for Britain, with its significance even being compared to that of Egypt. For this reason, British diplomacy reacted very sensitively to any external influence in the region. Internal factors of British colonial policy also played an important role in this confrontation. In particular, the policy promoted by Cecil Rhodes aimed at incorporating Transvaal into the Cape Colony. Von Marschall sharply criticized this policy, describing it as contrary to the existing situation. He emphasized that it was precisely British pressure and expansionist policy that had led to the emergence of favorable attitudes toward Germany in Transvaal. Nevertheless, Britain attempted to place responsibility for this development on Germany. German diplomacy, in justifying its position, put forward another important argument, namely that for Germany there was, in fact, no “Transvaal question.” This approach reflected Germany’s view of the region as an independent economic entity. Britain, by contrast, assessed Transvaal within the framework of its geopolitical interests. As a result, the conflict between the two states was not territorial in nature but rather a clash of economic and strategic interests. The diplomatic correspondence shows that although communication between the parties appeared outwardly polite and cautious, in reality there existed deep mistrust and confrontation. While Britain accused Germany of encouraging the Boers, Germany accused Britain of hypocrisy. Both sides justified their policies in terms of maintaining the status quo, yet in practice they attributed different meanings to this concept.

By the end of 1895, the Transvaal question had become the main point of tension in German–British relations. This situation was further intensified by the Krüger telegram of 1896. Thus, the Transvaal issue evolved beyond a regional problem and became an important element of global rivalry among the great powers. At the same time, Germany viewed British colonial policy as one-sided and unjust. Decisions taken in Witu, Togoland, and the hinterland of the Niger that ran counter to German interests were particularly noted. This contributed to the growth of negative attitudes toward Britain within Germany. Criticism was also directed at the British government for being influenced by pressure from certain circles within its own press. Although the diplomatic dialogue between the two sides was lively and open, it ultimately concluded in a formally friendly manner. The British ambassador emphasized that some issues that appeared negative at present might later be interpreted in a more positive light. Meanwhile, Kaiser Wilhelm II evaluated these negotiations positively, considering British statements regarding Egypt to be illogical and, in fact, a diplomatic probe aimed at uncovering Germany’s relations with Russia. Overall, these diplomatic exchanges demonstrate the deepening tensions between Germany and Great Britain. The Transvaal issue became a manifestation of broader geopolitical and economic rivalry between the two powers, a process that would later intensify further and contribute to changes in the balance of power in Europe. In 1895, German–British diplomatic relations were becoming increasingly strained not only over African issues but also within the broader framework of international politics. A letter from Kaiser Wilhelm II to the State Secretary of the Foreign Office, Baron von Marschall, reveals important aspects of this

process. The document highlights the complex relations between Britain, Russia, and other European powers, particularly in connection with the Eastern Question and the situation in the Ottoman Empire. During the conversation, the British military representative, Colonel Swaine, raised the issue of the Russian newspaper “Grazhdanin,” expressing concern over its strongly anti-British tone. In his view, despite Britain’s efforts to improve relations with Russia, these attempts had failed, and such press publications only worsened the situation. Wilhelm II, in response, argued that the influence of the Russian press was relatively limited, whereas the British press played a far more significant role in shaping public opinion. He particularly linked the international outcry surrounding the Armenian question to the activities of the British press. The discussion also highlighted how British domestic politics influenced its foreign policy. Colonel Swaine noted that Prime Minister Lord Salisbury found himself in a difficult position, especially due to the consequences of earlier political decisions, which had created uncertainty. As a result, Britain was seeking rapprochement with various states, attempting to understand their positions, particularly regarding Turkey. This indicated a lack of a clear and consistent strategy on Britain’s part. Wilhelm II sharply criticized this policy, arguing that Britain’s actions in the Armenian question were incomprehensible and had increased distrust among other European powers. In contrast, the continental powers, including Germany and Russia, supported maintaining order in the Ottoman Empire and preserving the status quo, while Britain’s actions appeared to undermine this balance.

Another important aspect raised in the conversation concerns Britain’s Mediterranean policy. Among European states, suspicions had emerged that Britain might be changing its strategy—possibly intending to hand over Constantinople to Russia, win over France through concessions in Egypt, and take control of the Dardanelles. These assumptions clearly unsettled the British representative, who firmly denied the existence of such plans. Nevertheless, the very presence of such rumors indicates a growing general distrust toward Britain. In his remarks, Wilhelm II criticized Britain’s global strategy, emphasizing that its position in Egypt had in fact been maintained largely due to German support. If Britain were to abandon Egypt, it would also jeopardize its vital routes to India. From this perspective, Germany did not consider itself responsible for continuing Britain’s policy in the Mediterranean. In addition, the issue of the Berlin Treaty was also addressed during the discussion. Wilhelm II stressed that any territorial changes would contradict this international agreement and could not be carried out without the consent of the other signatory powers. This demonstrates Germany’s intention to conduct its policy in accordance with the principles of international law.

Overall, this document once again confirms the complex and contradictory nature of relations between Germany and Great Britain. Alongside the Transvaal question, the Eastern Question, Mediterranean policy, and colonial rivalry further intensified the mutual distrust between the two states. These processes eventually contributed to the reconfiguration of alliance systems among European powers and the deepening of global political confrontations. Wilhelm II sharply criticized this situation, emphasizing that Britain’s attitude was illogical. In his view, for the sake of a few small territories—“a few square miles of land, natives, and palm trees”—Britain was pursuing a threatening policy toward the German Emperor, who could have been its only true ally. In doing so, the Emperor not only presented himself as the leader of Germany but also reminded of his familial ties to the British royal family, highlighting the complexity of the situation. The British military representative reacted with surprise, suggesting that this might be a misunderstanding and that the ambassador may have acted without specific instructions from London. However, the German side did not consider such a tone accidental, but rather viewed it as a continuation of the negative rhetoric regularly employed by the British press against

Germany. In particular, press organs close to the government were sharply criticized for their offensive remarks toward Germany and the Triple Alliance.

In his speech, Wilhelm II emphasized that his efforts to bring Germany and Great Britain closer together had largely failed. He noted that for seven years he had tried to foster rapprochement between the two states on the basis of shared interests, but that British policy and the negative attitude of the press had undermined these efforts. This, in turn, contributed to growing distrust toward Britain within Germany. The Emperor also criticized the ambiguity and inconsistency of British policy. In his view, Germany had to act in accordance with its own interests and could not continuously adapt to the shifting moods of British politics. Otherwise, Germany might be forced to move closer to other major powers, particularly France and Russia, which could significantly affect the balance of power in Europe. The Emperor concluded the conversation with an important warning, stating that Britain had effectively become isolated on the international stage as a result of its “policy of selfishness and bullying.” To overcome this isolation, Britain would have to make a clear choice: either to openly cooperate with the Triple Alliance or to adopt a policy in opposition to it. The former option, he stressed, would require clear, written, and formal guarantees in the manner customary among continental powers. Overall, this document demonstrates that German–British diplomatic relations had reached a critical turning point. Mutual distrust, colonial rivalry, and differences in political strategy were increasingly pushing the two states in opposing directions, a process that would later contribute to the reconfiguration of alliance systems in Europe and the emergence of major international conflicts.

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