

= SMS Grosser Kurfürst (1875) =

For the battleship of the same name , see SMS Grosser Kurfürst

SMS Grosser Kurfürst (or Großer) was an ironclad turret ship of the German Kaiserliche Marine . She was laid down at the Imperial Dockyard in Wilhelmshaven in 1870 and completed in 1878 ; her long construction time was in part due to a redesign that was completed after work on the ship had begun . Her main battery of four 26 cm (10 in) guns was initially to be placed in a central armored battery , but during the redesign this was altered to a pair of twin gun turrets amidships .

Grosser Kurfürst was sunk on her maiden voyage in an accidental collision with the ironclad SMS König Wilhelm . The two ships , along with SMS Preussen were steaming in the English Channel on 31 May 1878 . The three ships encountered a group of fishing boats , and in turning to avoid them , Grosser Kurfürst inadvertently crossed too closely to König Wilhelm . The latter rammed Grosser Kurfürst , which sank in the span of about eight minutes , taking between 269 and 276 of her crew with her . Her loss spurred a series of investigations into the circumstances of the collision , which ultimately resulted in the acquittal of both Rear Admiral Carl Ferdinand Batsch , the squadron commander , and Count Alexander von Monts , the captain of Grosser Kurfürst . Political infighting over the affair led to the ousting of Rear Admiral Reinhold von Werner from the navy .

= = Construction = =

Grosser Kurfürst was ordered by the Imperial Navy from the Imperial Dockyard in Wilhelmshaven ; her keel was laid in 1869 under construction number 2 . The ship was launched on 17 September 1875 and commissioned into the German fleet on 6 May 1878 . Grosser Kurfürst cost the German government 7 @, @ 303 @, @ 000 gold marks . As designed , Grosser Kurfürst was to have had her primary armament arranged in a central battery ; after she was laid down , she was altered to mount her main guns in a pair of twin turrets . Although she was the first ship in her class of three vessels to be laid down , she was the last to be launched and commissioned . This was because she was redesigned after work had begun , and she was built by the newly established Imperial Dockyard . Her sister Preussen was built by an experienced commercial ship builder , and Friedrich der Grosse was laid down after the redesign was completed .

The ship was 96 @. @ 59 meters (316 @. @ 9 ft) long overall and had a beam of 16 @. @ 30 m (53 @. @ 5 ft) and a draft of 7 @. @ 12 m (23 @. @ 4 ft) forward . Grosser Kurfürst was powered by one 3 @- @ cylinder single expansion steam engine , which was supplied with steam by six coal @- @ fired transverse trunk boilers . The ship 's top speed was 14 knots (26 km / h ; 16 mph) , at 5 @, @ 468 indicated horsepower (4 @, @ 077 kW) . She was also equipped with a full ship rig . Her standard complement consisted of 46 officers and 454 enlisted men .

She was armed with four 26 cm (10 in) L / 22 guns mounted in a pair of gun turrets placed amidships . As built , the ship was also equipped with two 17 cm (6 @. @ 7 in) L / 25 guns . Grosser Kurfürst 's armor was made of wrought iron and backed with teak . The armored belt was arrayed in two strakes . The upper strake was 203 mm (8 @. @ 0 in) thick ; the lower strake ranged in thickness from 102 to 229 mm (4 @. @ 0 to 9 @. @ 0 in) . Both were backed with 234 to 260 mm (9 @. @ 2 to 10 @. @ 2 in) of teak . The gun turrets were protected by 203 to 254 mm (8 @. @ 0 to 10 @. @ 0 in) armor on the sides , backed by 260 mm of teak .

= = Service history = =

= = Collision and loss = =

In April 1878 , the armored squadron was reactivated for the annual summer training cycle , under the command of Rear Admiral Carl Ferdinand Batsch . Grosser Kurfürst joined the unit , which included her sisters Preussen and Friedrich der Grosse and the large ironclad König Wilhelm , after her commissioning on 6 May . A grounding by Friedrich der Grosse caused serious damage to her

hull and prevented her from taking part in the upcoming training cruise . The three ships left Wilhelmshaven on the 29th . König Wilhelm and Preussen steamed in a line , with Grosser Kurfürst off to starboard . On the morning of the 31st , the three ships encountered a pair of sailing vessels off Folkestone . Grosser Kurfürst turned to port to avoid the boats while König Wilhelm sought to pass the two boats , but there was not enough distance between her and Grosser Kurfürst . She therefore turned hard to port to avoid Grosser Kurfürst , but the action was not taken quickly enough , and König Wilhelm found herself pointed directly at Grosser Kurfürst . König Wilhelm 's ram bow tore a hole in Grosser Kurfürst .

A failure to adequately seal the watertight bulkheads aboard Grosser Kurfürst caused the ship to sink rapidly , in the span of about eight minutes . Figures for the number of fatalities vary . Erich Gröner reports that out of a crew of 500 men , 269 died in the accident , while Lawrence Sondhaus states that 276 men were killed . Many of the bodies ended up in Cheriton Road Cemetery , where there is a substantial memorial . Arthur Sullivan , on his way to Paris , witnessed the incident , writing , " I saw it all ? saw the unfortunate vessel slowly go over and disappear under the water in clear , bright sunshine , and the water like a calm lake . It was too horrible ? and then we saw all the boats moving about picking up the survivors , some so exhausted they had to be lifted on to the ships . " Among those rescued was the ship 's captain , Count Alexander von Monts .

König Wilhelm was also badly damaged in the collision , with severe flooding forward . König Wilhelm 's captain initially planned on beaching the ship to prevent it from sinking , but determined that the ship 's pumps could hold the flooding to an acceptable level . The ship made for Portsmouth , where temporary repairs could be effected to allow the ship to return to Germany . In the aftermath of the collision , the German navy held a court martial for Rear Admiral Batsch , the squadron commander , and Captains Monts and Kuehne , the commanders of the two ships , along with Lieutenant Clausa , the first officer aboard Grosser Kurfürst , to investigate the sinking .

= = = Inquiry = = =

In the ensuing inquiry , chaired by Rear Admiral Reinhold von Werner , Monts testified that he had not been given sufficient time to familiarize himself with the ship and its crew , who were themselves unfamiliar with the vessel . Monts argued that the mobilization process for the newly commissioned ship should have lasted four to six weeks , rather than the three he had been given . The day before the squadron left Wilhelmshaven , Batsch complained to General Albrecht von Stosch , the chief of the Kaiserliche Marine , that a significant number of dockyard workers were still finishing work on Grosser Kurfürst . Werner and the board determined that Admiral Batsch was at fault and exonerated Monts .

Stosch was infuriated that the proceedings had been allowed to become a forum for criticism of his policies , for which he blamed Werner . He appealed to Kaiser Wilhelm I , stating that the inquiry had unfairly blamed Admiral Batsch , and requested a new court martial for the involved officers . Simultaneously , Stosch began a campaign to force Werner out of the navy . This was in part to ensure that Batsch , his protégé , would be next in line after Stosch retired . Despite his popularity , particularly with Kaiser Wilhelm I and his son , Werner was unable to resist Stosch 's efforts to force his ouster . On 15 October 1878 , he requested retirement .

The second court martial again found Batsch guilty and Monts innocent of negligence . A third investigation , held in January 1879 , reversed the decision of the previous verdicts and sentenced Monts to a prison term of one month and two days , though the Kaiser refused to implement the punishment . This necessitated another trial , which returned to the initial verdict and sentenced Batsch to six months in prison . The Kaiser commuted Batsch 's sentence after he had served two months ' time . Disappointed that his protégé had taken the blame for the sinking , Stosch requested another court martial for Monts , who was found not guilty . The Kaiser officially approved the verdict , which put an end to the series of trials over the sinking of Grosser Kurfürst .