

As if the Weddell Sea were not Big Enough: Two Explorers and One Challenge in 1914

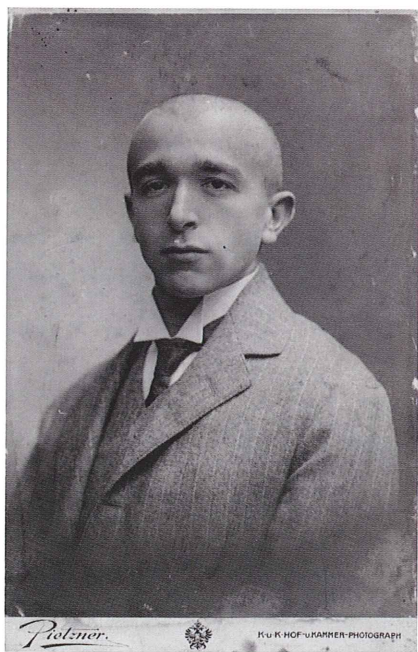
by Ursula Rack, Polar Historian, Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury

In December 1912, a mutiny ended the German Antarctic expedition led by Wilhelm Filchner. The expedition's survey area had been the Weddell Sea. Felix König, a member of that failed expedition, while on his way home to Austria was already developing a plan to continue where Filchner had had to give up. But, unbeknownst to König, another explorer, Ernest Shackleton, had plans of his own for the Weddell Sea. Thus a dispute arose between these two great explorers, and suddenly the Weddell Sea did not seem like a big enough place.

Felix König was an Austrian lawyer and sportsman. He was invited by Wilhelm Filchner to join his Antarctic expedition of 1911–1912 as a mountaineer and dog handler. Filchner's expedition ended in disaster. When they reached South Georgia, a mutiny set the definite end to the expedition in December 1912. König, on his way home from South Georgia to Austria, made plans to continue where Filchner's expedition had been abandoned.

Ernest Shackleton was a well-known and experienced Antarctic explorer. He took part on Robert F. Scott's first Antarctic expedition (1901–1904) and led his own expedition in 1907–1909. He stated that he already had plans to equip another expedition in the near future, but in 1909 announced it only within his circle of friends. This expedition would explore the Weddell Sea and would be the starting point to traverse the Antarctic continent.

So, in 1914, the Weddell Sea did not seem big enough, and these two men found themselves in the middle of a dispute over their ambitions to explore the same area of the Antarctic. As with any argument, there were two sides to the story.



Felix König,
photographed by Karl Pietzner
Author's private collection

This article illustrates the arguments behind this dispute, and how the contemporary print media presented the men's positions in the debate.

The exact time when this conflict started cannot be determined. There is also almost no correspondence available to retrace the events. However, there are a certain number of newspaper articles available that give a good insight into the controversy. The first evidence of König's plans that is accessible is the report of the committee meeting of the "Austrian Antarctic expedition" of 16 January 1914,¹ published by the k.k.² Geographical Society. It presents to the general public the plans of the Austrian Antarctic expedition, led by Felix König. The expedition was supported by members of the imperial family, the Austrian Academy of Science, and many national and international scientists and celebrities, and these are reflected in the list of attendees of that meeting. After the description of the formalities, the first address stated: "It is now seven month[s] since, in that very building, Dr. König has [...] introduced his plans for an Austrian Antarctic expedition."³ That means that the official introduction of his plans would have been in June 1913. In the same report it is mentioned that a "few weeks ago Shackleton announced the plan for an English Trans Antarctic Expedition."⁴ The following statement stresses that Shackleton's plans for scientific work in the Weddell Sea appear to be similar to König's plan (see maps overleaf). After this address the floor was handed over to Otto Nordenskjöld, the famous Swedish Antarctic explorer. He stated emphatically the importance of science in that region (Nordenskjöld had overwintered at the Antarctic Peninsula in 1901–1904).

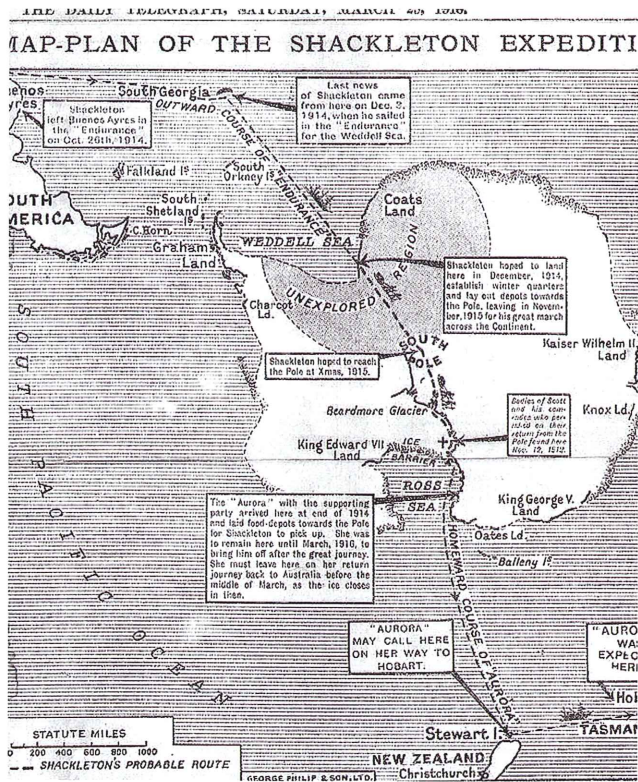
Austrian and British newspaper articles from the following months illustrate the development of this discussion of who was entitled to an expedition into the Weddell Sea. The tone on both sides was getting more and more competitive and the situation seemed deadlocked. Shackleton and König had similar

1 *Mitteilungen der kaiserlich-königlichen Geographischen Gesellschaft* (Wien), 57, 1–3, 1914, pp. 10–24.

2 k.k. means "kaiserlich-königlich" ("imperial and royal") and was used after 1867 for the western part of the Austro-Hungarian dual monarchy.

3 "Sieben Monate sind verflossen, seitdem in diesem Gebäude Herr Dr. König [...] seinen Plan einer Österreichischen Antarktischen Expedition vorlegte." (*Mitteilungen der kaiserlich-königlichen Geographischen Gesellschaft* (Wien), 57, 1–3, 1914, p. 14).

4 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

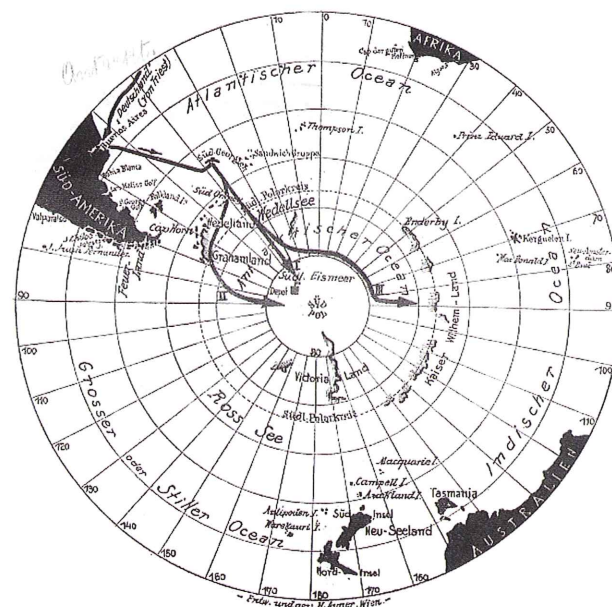


Shackleton's proposed plan
The Daily Telegraph, London, 25 March 1914

arguments for their priority and claimed similar scientific work and routes. In March 1914 a report appeared in a newspaper that "Lieutenant Filchner asserts that he has transferred to Lieutenant Koenig the right to carry on the uncompleted programme of the Filchner expedition, which entitles Koenig to priority over Sir Ernest Shackleton."⁵ The day before this item appeared, an open letter from König was published in *The Times* of London: "I have just received an answer from London. Sir Ernest Shackleton refuses cooperation with the Austrian Antarctic Expedition, and writes to me that he is willing to come to an understanding only with regard to the subsequent tabulation of meteorological and magnetic observations."⁶ In some previous newspaper articles the sharing of a base had been proposed from König's side, showing a link to the idea of scientific cooperation in the spirit of the First International Polar Year and the Antarctic expeditions of 1901–1905.

It is conspicuous that König had the more powerful supporters on his side: Roald Amundsen, Wilhelm Filchner, Otto Nordenskjöld, and Sir Clements Markham, the former president of the Royal Geographical Society. It seems that Markham still had power to intervene in issues such as this one, as shown in a report in the *Arbeiterzeitung* (Wien) on 19 March: "Also the Englishman Markham appears now to put in a word for Dr. König. [...] he declares that he has to leave the area to Dr. König where he worked already in former times [...]"⁷ That meant that König should conduct the expedition in that area where Filchner had landed on his expedition in 1911/12.

5 *The Press* (Christchurch, New Zealand), Vol. L, Issue 14909, 6 March 1914, p. 7.
6 *The Times* (London), 5 March 1914, p. 25.
7 "[...] Jetzt tritt auch der Engländer Markham auf den Plan, um für Dr. König sein Wort einzulegen. [...] [er] erklärt, daß man Dr. König das Gebiet überlassen müsse, in dem er schon früher gearbeitet habe. [...]"



Die österreichische Südpolexpedition: Stige der Route, welche die von Dr. Felix König projektierte Forschungsreise nehmen soll, und des bisher bekannten Südpolgebietes. (Siehe Seite 11.)
nach einer Originalzeichnung für das "Jüdische Blatt" von Albert von Winiwiler.

König's proposed plan
Source unknown; author's private collection

However, even after that decision, the controversy continued, and was reflected in the newspapers through quoted parts of open letters and interviews. Frequently these items repeat themselves, but it is notable that they show that for a while there was consideration given to the idea of a meeting in Germany between the two expedition leaders to discuss their plans. This was mentioned in Hugh Robert Mill's biography of Shackleton. He stated that Filchner was trying to "[...] bring the two expeditions to some sort of *modus vivendi*. He wrote begging Shackleton to come to Berlin in the last week of July to meet König [...]"⁸ However, because of the closeness of the planned departure of the expedition, Shackleton suggested that König should come to London. Mill also stated that because of the coming war, Shackleton would have been in danger if he had decided to follow Filchner's proposal: "Had he gone to Berlin there is little doubt that his endurance would have been tested for the next few years, not in the southern ice, but in the Ruhleben internment camp."⁹ That could not have been the case, because the internment camp Ruhleben was not established before November 1914. Nevertheless, this meeting was not going to happen.

In the end Shackleton's ship *Endurance* left London on 1 August 1914 for Antarctica. König's departure was prohibited by the Austro-Hungarian government as a result of the outbreak of the First World War and instead of going to Antarctica he joined the war as a lieutenant in Galicia in Poland. In September 1915 he was captured, and he spent until June 1918 in Krasnoyarsk, Siberia, as a prisoner of war.¹⁰ He never again saw the Antarctic.

8 H. R. Mill, *The Life of Sir Ernest Shackleton* (London, Heinemann, 1933), p. 201.
9 *Ibid.*
10 For an article on König's status as prisoner of war, see: U. Rack, "Felix König and the European science community across enemy lines during the First World War", *The Polar Journal*, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2154896X.2014.913928>.