

Introduction

At ten past two in the afternoon of Friday 7th May 1915, Kapitänleutnant Walter Schwieger, commanding officer of the German submarine *U20*, fired a single torpedo at the passenger liner *Lusitania*. Eighteen minutes later the pride of the Cunard fleet disappeared beneath the waves, taking 1,198 men, women and children with her. The sinking of the *Lusitania* is undoubtedly the single most famous act of submarine warfare of the twentieth century. Not only did it galvanize American opinion behind the Allied cause, but it also dramatically ushered in a new, more savage era in naval warfare. The *Lusitania* was a civilian vessel struck without warning by an unseen opponent; the victims of the attack were all non-combatants, innocent civilians going about their lawful business on the high seas. Thus, both in its method and in its results, this action brought the stark brutality of ‘total war’ to the world’s oceans.¹

For the history of the Royal Navy, the sinking of the *Lusitania* has a further significance. The demise of this great ship, sailing as it was unarmed and unescorted off the Irish coast, serves for many as demonstrable proof of the backwardness of British naval thinking.² That so famous and important a vessel could be allowed to travel alone and unprotected and, thereby, be left to its own fate in dangerous waters showed that no thought had been given by those in charge of Britain’s maritime defences to the realities of the peril the country faced. Had the Royal Navy been truly prepared for modern ‘total’ warfare, so the argument runs, it would have anticipated that Germany would seek to defeat Britain with an attack on its ocean trade, and measures to protect British commerce from such methods would have been thought through ahead of time and put into place from the war’s outset.

This is a compelling argument, and it is certainly true that Britain was not ready for unrestricted submarine warfare, a tactic that almost brought about the nation’s defeat in 1917. Yet, ironically, the *Lusitania* itself is proof that, well before the outbreak of the First World War, the Royal Navy had in fact given a great deal of thought to the possibility of a German assault on British trade. For the very liner that succumbed so dramatically to a German torpedo in 1915 had been specifically

¹ Arnold Kludas, *Great Passenger Ships of the World. Volume 1: 1858–1912* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 134. In fact, as James Goldrick has shown, the first German exercise in total war at sea was the less high-profile decision to fire on British trawlers. However, this has not captured the popular imagination in the same way as the sinking of the *Lusitania*. James Goldrick, *The King’s Ships were at Sea: The War in the North Sea, August 1914–February 1915* (Annapolis, MD, 1984), p. 79.

² Patrick Beesly, *Room 40: British Naval Intelligence 1914–1918* (London, 1982), p. 86; David Stafford, *Churchill and Secret Service* (London, 1997), p. 74.

conceived a decade earlier to protect British commerce from a German attack. The product of an agreement between the Cunard Company and the British government, the *Lusitania* and her sister, *Mauretania*, were meant to serve as luxury passenger vessels in peacetime but to transform into auxiliary cruisers in wartime. To this end, they were built with massive turbines capable of generating a high sea-speed, large coal bunkers designed to provide great endurance, and pre-established fittings for gun mountings intended to facilitate an easy-to-install offensive capability.³ Considerable sums of public money went into making this possible.

The Admiralty's decision to offer Cunard a huge subsidy to build two fast liners capable of conversion into fast auxiliary cruisers reflected the navy's emerging belief that a new and dangerous threat to British commerce was being created. The threat in question came not from Britain's traditional enemies, France and Russia, but from a new opponent, Germany, whose extensive fleet of large Atlantic liners—though not U-boats, of which she then had none—was viewed with apprehension. Admiralty intelligence suggested, not entirely without reason as we shall see, that these ships were capable of exceptional speed, were manned largely by naval reservists and always had arms stowed on board. As a result, at the very moment war broke out, it was feared that these vessels would be converted into auxiliary warships and sent to prey on the trade routes in the manner of the privateers of old. In this capacity they would be very dangerous. Because of their exceptional speed not only would no British merchantmen be able to escape them, but, more worrying still, no British warships would be able to catch them. They would, therefore, be in a position to run amok on the sea lanes; hence the idea of building two even faster British liners to track them down.

Paying Cunard to build the *Lusitania* and *Mauretania* was the first step in a twelve-year history of Admiralty efforts to counter the threat to British commerce that was expected to come from Germany's large fleet of fast transatlantic liners, the so-called 'ocean greyhounds'. These efforts included developing new types of auxiliary and then regular warships; a campaign to change international law to prohibit the conversion of civilian ships into men-of-war on the high seas; and the establishment of a new global intelligence network to determine the location of German liners and route British merchantmen away from them. Finally, following the appointment of Winston Churchill as First Lord of the Admiralty in late 1911, the controversial decision was taken to undertake a major programme of arming British merchant vessels for their own defence, a decision that also involved taking steps to place trained gun crews on these vessels in peacetime. Two years were devoted to developing and implementing this scheme.

These various efforts to defend British commerce from German attack absorbed considerable resources at the Admiralty. Yet, despite the time, energy and money devoted to them, the idea that the British naval leadership perceived a danger to the nation's seaborne trade from a German assault, let alone that it spent twelve years

³ The high coal consumption of these vessels when travelling at speed, a trait which would severely limit their range, notwithstanding the capacity of their bunkers, was not considered at the time.

developing countermeasures to meet this threat, has received almost no recognition from historians. The standard work on the Admiralty's trade defence planning before the First World War is a 1968 doctoral dissertation by Brian Ranft.⁴ While this is an important piece of research, its value as a study of pre-war policy is limited by virtue of its chronological range. Ranft's main interest was the nineteenth century and, as a result, he took his account no further than 1905, thereby omitting, quite logically, all consideration of the crucial decade before the outbreak of war. Accordingly, he has almost nothing to say either about German plans to attack British commerce or about any prospective British schemes to counter them. Nor, it seems, has anybody else. Although it is over four decades since Ranft completed his examination, no other historian has attempted to continue the work he began and explain British trade protection policy in the run up to the First World War. How can one account for this remarkable gap in the literature?

One explanation is that the attention of historians has been directed elsewhere. Contrary to some peacetime visions of what naval warfare would actually look like, when the fighting did finally begin in August 1914, the war at sea turned out to be dominated not by confrontations between fleets, as had been widely and erroneously anticipated, but by two long-running, slowly fought, global battles: the Allied 'blockade' of the Central Powers and Germany's unrestricted submarine campaign against Allied shipping. The impact that these two protracted struggles exerted, first upon the course of the conflict and, subsequently, upon the popular imagination, has led to much research being targeted into these areas in preference to other related fields. Thus, for example, many of the historians who have looked at British preparations for economic warfare before the First World War have been much more interested in the *offensive* aspects of British policy, namely the plans to exclude Germany from global commerce, than on the *defensive* plans to protect British trade from German deprivations. These are usually dealt with only briefly and in the most general terms. In a similar way, a great deal of thought has been devoted to the question of why the British government failed to anticipate the U-boat threat, a focus that, by definition, reflects the dictates of hindsight and the obsessions of the present rather than the issues that concerned contemporary policy-makers. Hence, in much of the current literature, explaining what was not foreseen—that is, U-boats—is given priority over the more accurate predictions that were made, such as the fact that Germany intended to attack British shipping with surface raiders.

A further and more substantive barrier to the proper consideration of this topic is the current and highly polarized debate about the origins and nature of the Anglo-German naval race. Two alternative and radically different schools of thought exist over when, why, or even if, the German Empire came to be perceived by the British government as a likely future opponent. In the traditional canon of naval history, as first formulated in 1940 by Arthur Marder, the British Admiralty realized as early as 1902 that the German naval construction programme, begun in

⁴ Brian Ranft, 'The Naval Defence of British Sea-Borne Trade, 1860–1905' (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 1968).

1898 under the auspices of Admiral Tirpitz, was being undertaken with the explicit purpose of building a fleet capable of fighting a major engagement against the Royal Navy in the North Sea. Accordingly, the British naval authorities promptly strove to meet this challenge. From this point onwards, the actions of the Admiralty, including the building of ever more warships, the introduction of new technologies and the gradual withdrawal of Britain's scattered naval forces to home waters, were principally driven by the need to counter the threat posed by the expansion of German maritime power.⁵

In reaching this conclusion, Marder, like Tirpitz, focused principally on battleships. He reasoned that the German decision to construct warships for a fleet engagement rather than cruisers for service in distant waters implied a strategy of fighting a traditional naval battle in the North Sea rather than a *guerre de course* against British shipping throughout the world's oceans and that the British naval authorities recognized this intention. As a result, though they were concerned about the British battle fleet being defeated by its German counterpart and of Britain thereby losing command of the sea, they saw no threat to British commerce so long as Germany was their main enemy. Accordingly, trade defence was not a matter that concerned them.

The orthodox narrative about British fears of a German threat going back to 1902 was a compelling one; however, not everyone was convinced. The first major critic was Ruddock Mackay. He argued that the nature of the British fleet redeployment of 1904, carried out by the new First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, showed that well after 1902 the traditional Franco-Russian naval challenge rather than the German threat was still the main focus of the Admiralty's attention. Consequently, whatever might have occurred afterwards, before 1905 Britain's naval authorities were not unduly concerned by Germany's growing battle fleet.⁶ Mackay's careful critique was subsequently taken up with gusto by two other revisionist historians, Jon Sumida and Nicholas Lambert. They agreed with Mackay's contention that Fisher's redistribution demonstrated that he 'regarded France and Russia as the Royal Navy's most likely opponents in any future war... [and was not] unduly concerned at the expansion of the German Navy.'⁷ Additionally, they appended a further element to the argument, proposing that Fisher's Franco-Russian focus and his concomitant lack of interest in Germany were heavily influenced by the ability of the former and the inability of the latter to threaten British trade. As Nicholas Lambert explains it, 'having thought deeply about the character of twentieth-century maritime war', Fisher saw no danger of Britain losing command

⁵ Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880–1905* (New York, 1940); Arthur J. Marder, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone. Volume 2: Years of Power, 1904–1914* (London, 1956; hereafter referred to as *FGDN*); Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. Volume I: The Road to War, 1904–1914* (Oxford, 1961).

⁶ Ruddock F. Mackay, 'The Admiralty, the German Navy, and the redistribution of the British Fleet, 1904–1905', *Mariner's Mirror* 56 (1970), 341–6; Ruddock F. Mackay, *Fisher of Kilverstone* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 314–19.

⁷ Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Strategic command and control for maneuver warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's "War Room" system, 1905–1915', *Journal of Military History* 69 (2005), 375–6.

of her home waters to a foreign battle fleet, the threat of which could cheaply and easily be neutralized by small torpedo craft. Instead, he believed that the principal peril to the nation lay in 'a stranglehold' being placed on the British economy by a foreign power being able to 'harass her trade routes', depriving the nation of vital supplies of food and raw materials. The weapon of choice for this purpose, says Lambert, was the armoured cruiser. The French and Russian navies had long espoused a *guerre de course* strategy, had access to numerous overseas bases and were equipped with large numbers of armoured cruisers explicitly designed for commerce destroying. As a result, they were seen as posing a significant danger. By contrast, the Germans, with a growing force of battleships, designed to fight a traditional fleet action in the North Sea, but negligible numbers of armoured cruisers for attacking the trade routes, appeared hardly a menace at all. Indeed, so little threat did they pose that, according to Lambert, they were only considered by the Admiralty in the unlikely context 'that Germany might join a Franco-Russian combination against Britain'.⁸ In short, according to Sumida and Lambert, because Germany did not possess the *warships* for commerce raiding (auxiliary cruisers were not considered in this argument), the growth of German sea power neither worried the Admiralty nor required any particular focus on trade defence.

While there is little shared ground between the two competing interpretations of the Anglo-German naval race, they do have one element in common: both assert that the growth of German sea power, being based upon the battleship rather than the cruiser, did not threaten the flow of goods in and out of the British Isles and, therefore, did not provide any stimulus for the Admiralty to develop new measures to protect the nation's commerce. With this point embedded in both sides of the argument, it is little wonder that it is generally accepted in the current literature that there is no need for the historian to look deeply into the question of British measures to protect maritime trade from German attack, since the Admiralty ignored the matter in the run up to the First World War in the mistaken belief that Germany, with a short coastline, few overseas bases and only a small number of cruisers, was ill-equipped to wage such a war and would be unable to do so in practice.⁹ If the historian wishes to study anything, says Angus Ross, in an important and well-known article on the alleged British failure to anticipate an attack on the nation's trade that exemplifies this thinking, it should not be the few pitiful measures that were taken in this area, but the reason for the 'complacency' that led to this 'collective lack of action'.¹⁰

This book challenges both the orthodox and revisionist interpretations. It argues that the expansion of German maritime power became an important consideration in the thinking of the British naval authorities from the very start of the twentieth

⁸ Nicholas A. Lambert, 'Transformation and technology in the Fisher era: The impact of the communications revolution', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 27 (2004), 273.

⁹ See, for example, Paul M. Kennedy, 'Great Britain before 1914', in Ernest R. May (ed.), *Knowing One's Enemies: Intelligence before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, 1984), p. 187.

¹⁰ Angus Ross, 'Losing the initiative in mercantile warfare: Great Britain's surprising failure to anticipate maritime challenges to her global trading network in the First World War', *International Journal of Naval History* 1 (2002) <http://www.ijnhonline.org/volume1_number1_Apr02/article_ross_great-britain_mercantile.doc.htm>

century, much earlier than the current revisionist consensus would allow. However, contrary to the orthodox view that this concern derived exclusively from the growth of the German battle fleet, it demonstrates instead that fear of German commerce raiding was, in fact, one of the initial spurs. In 1901, elements within the Admiralty identified what they regarded as a real and potent danger to British trade from Germany's extensive fleet of large Atlantic liners. They feared, rightly as it transpired, that the Germans planned to convert these great vessels in wartime into auxiliary cruisers and send them as corsairs onto the trade routes. With their high speeds, excellent sea-keeping qualities and supposedly exceptional cruising radiuses, it was anticipated that they would be formidable adversaries, capable of making numerous early captures that would cause panic in the international shipping world and possibly force Britain to make peace. Thus, irrespective of whether or not they were concerned either then or subsequently by the growth of the German battle fleet, this gave the naval authorities in London reason to focus on the expansion of German maritime power and to plan against it. Additionally, having once identified the threat from German surface raiders, the Admiralty remained highly concerned right up to the outbreak of war at the prospect of a German *guerre de course* against British seaborne commerce. Accordingly, it spent the next twelve years devising ways to counter it. It is this story of the menace posed by Germany's 'ocean greyhounds' and the extensive and long-term nature of the British response to it that will be told here.

In the process, several important conclusions will be reached. First, from the end of 1901, the British Admiralty identified a threat to the nation's shipping from fast armed German merchant vessels, principally transatlantic liners. Second, the Admiralty was not wrong to do so. Germany *did* develop and continuously refine schemes for deploying its liners in a commerce war and these plans grew in scope and sophistication over time. Third, over the next twelve years the Royal Navy unrolled a series of initiatives designed to frustrate the German design. Finally, because these countermeasures were all introduced, either wholly or partly, to combat the menace of German mercantile cruisers, the measures discussed are not separate, isolated and individual initiatives in the broad sweep of British naval policy, but must be seen as related actions linked together by a single thread and forming part of a common narrative, namely British preparation for a commerce war undertaken against the nation's shipping by German surface raiders. As a result, it will be concluded that the generally held theory that Britain did not expect a campaign to be launched against her seaborne trade in wartime, the so-called 'surprising failure to anticipate maritime challenges to her global trading network', proves to be not so much surprising as a myth.¹¹ As this book shows, such a challenge was both clearly anticipated and systematically addressed in the country's naval preparations.

¹¹ Ibid.