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# Naval History by Conspiracy Theory: The British Admiralty before the First World War and the Methodology of Revisionism

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**ABSTRACT** Revisionist interpretations of British naval policy in the Fisher era claim that an elaborate smokescreen was created to hide the Royal Navy's real policies; while documents showing the true goals were systematically destroyed. By asserting this, revisionists are able to dismiss those parts of the documentary record that contradict their theories, while simultaneously excusing the lack of evidence for their theories by claiming it has been destroyed. This article shows that this methodology is misleading and untenable.

**KEY WORDS:** Royal Navy, First World War, War Plans, Sir John Fisher

In recent times the historiography of the Royal Navy in the decade before the First World War has been a lively area of study and debate. After many years in which a settled interpretation was established and came to predominate – an interpretation centred on competitive dreadnought building and the Anglo-German naval race<sup>1</sup> – a series of new examinations by revisionist historians appeared that cast an entirely different light upon the era and aimed to challenge, if not actually overturn, many long-hallowed assumptions.<sup>2</sup> Among the areas the revisionists contested were: first, that the Royal Navy under the

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power* (New York: Knopf 1940); idem, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow. Volume 1: The Road to War, 1904–1914* (Oxford: OUP 1961); Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Alan Lane 1976).

<sup>2</sup>Jon T. Sumida, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology and British Naval Policy, 1889–1914* (London: Routledge 1993).

leadership of First Sea Lord Admiral Sir John Fisher deliberately instigated a revolution in naval warship design through the building of HMS *Dreadnought*, a new type of turbine-powered all-big-gun battleship that rendered obsolete all previous battleships; second, that Fisher sought to build a fleet of these ‘dreadnoughts’ in order to protect Great Britain from the menace of the growing German Navy; third, that the *Dreadnought* having been developed because the all-big-gun concept was better suited to long-range gunnery, preparing for an engagement at ever greater distances became the Royal Navy’s principal tactical assumption in the quest for a decisive battle; and finally, that the Admiralty’s plan for war against Germany was the slow strangulation of the German economy through a strategy of interdicting German trade commonly, if inaccurately, known as ‘blockade’.

In place of these arguments revisionists posited that far from instigating a Dreadnought revolution, Fisher was actually against the construction of battleships, *Dreadnought* included, and sought instead to replace the battleship with the battlecruiser, a multi-role warship that could fight foreign battleships if the occasion arose, but which would otherwise protect British commerce along distant trade routes. To the objection that this would have left Britain without a defence against invasion, it was argued that, under Fisher, the protection of the British Isles did not rest on battleships at all, but was instead devolved to torpedo-armed flotilla craft, smaller vessels such as destroyers and submarines which, through a strategy known as ‘flotilla defence’, would render the narrow waters around the British Isles impassable to large armoured warships. On top of this, it has also been suggested that before the outbreak of war in 1914 the Royal Navy abandoned the intention of fighting at long ranges, adopting instead a medium-range approach that has been termed the ‘technical-tactical synthesis’.<sup>3</sup> Finally, it has been proposed that far from adopting a grand strategy based upon slow economic strangulation, the Admiralty’s approach was actually predicated upon collapsing the global economy and thereby quickly undermining the financial sinews that supported the German war effort. Under this scheme a rapid victory was the anticipated result.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Jon T. Sumida, ‘The Quest for Reach: The Development of Long-Range Gunnery in the Royal Navy, 1901–1912’, in Stephen D. Chiabotti (ed.), *Tooling for War: Military Transformation in the Industrial Age* (Chicago: Imprint 1996), 49–96; idem, ‘A Matter of Timing: The Royal Navy and the Tactics of Decisive Battle, 1912–1916’, *Journal of Military History* 67/1 (Jan. 2003), 85–136; idem, ‘Expectation, Adaptation, and Resignation: British Battle Fleet Tactical Planning, August 1914–April 1916’, *Naval War College Review* 60/3 (Summer 2007), 119–30.

<sup>4</sup>Nicholas A. Lambert, *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 2012).

The revisionist arguments are notable not just for their originality, but also for their total reversal of previously received wisdom. They are not mere refinements of existing positions; they actually turn earlier assumptions on their heads. In the brave new interpretive world they have fashioned almost everything that we thought we knew about the British Admiralty turns out to be wrong.

The extent of this world turned upside down begs the question: why is it that scholars have not previously noticed the many remarkable and innovative dimensions of British naval thinking in this period, a series of developments which, in the revisionist perspective, amounted to a revolution in naval strategic thought? There are many possible answers to this, the most obvious one being that not one of these supposed naval revolutions actually took place. Fisher proved unable to replace battleships with battlecruisers; the Royal Navy never came to rely on mutual sea denial for home defence; no battleships were dropped in 1914 in favour of submarines; no British admiral adopted medium-range tactics at any major surface action of the First World War; and, when war came, a slow rather than a rapid economic warfare strategy was implemented. Thus, judged by results, each and every one of these 'revolutions' proved a phantom. If they existed, they are easily missed.

Of course, this is not the answer given by the revisionists themselves, who maintain that the key reason lies in the manner in which these innovative naval policies were advanced by their proponents and the effect their methods of advancement had on the documentary source base later available to historians.<sup>5</sup> Aware that the ends they sought were so revolutionary that they were bound to meet the strongest opposition from diehard traditionalists, who would be unable to break away from the comfortable practices of the past and accept such radical changes, Fisher and his like-minded colleagues allegedly pursued their reforms with more caution than would otherwise have been the case, taking great care in the manner in which they campaigned for the revolution they sought. One important aspect of this approach was that the reformers – Fisher in particular – never fully explained what they intended to do. Instead, for each step they advanced only such arguments as were necessary for the achievement of the specific objective of the moment. As many measures could be justified by reference to traditional and hence more palatable arguments and did not require a resort to the full revolutionary picture, the memoranda they produced to argue for specific reforms often revealed neither their real intent nor the full longer-term objective. Instead, as with all documents designed more to persuade than to explain, they contained misleading arguments

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<sup>5</sup>Jon T. Sumida, 'Sir John Fisher and the Dreadnought: The Sources of Naval Mythology', *Journal of Military History* 59 (Oct. 1995), 619–37.

chosen less with the intention of providing a true account for posterity than for their immediate appeal to the particular audience then being addressed. In short, the revisionists claim that much of the material that Fisher and his associates produced was a form of propaganda devised to canvass support for his schemes. It fooled many people in its day and, according to the revisionists, it fooled many historians thereafter. Thus, one reason why the orthodox history paints a picture that misses out on the 'naval revolution' is because the historians writing it have been duped into believing that the propagandistic messages Fisher put out actually represented his real objectives.

Given that many of these scholars were (and are) highly experienced archival researchers, well versed in documentary analysis and accustomed to the concept of ulterior motives, this explanation is, on the face of it, surprising. However, another inter-linked factor is proffered here to explain why, notwithstanding their many talents, these historians were nevertheless misled. According to the revisionist analysis, after the failure of Fisher and his supporters to implement their most radical reforms, their attempt to do so was deliberately covered up in order to remove the visible traces of this apparent set back and to dissociate them from policies that might be viewed as unsuccessful. This, it is said, led to the wholesale destruction of many of the key documents in which the details of the proposed 'naval revolution' had once been set out. This not only created a major lacuna in the archives, obstructing attempts to get to the truth, but it further exacerbated the problem of the propagandistic materials, because unlike the genuine documentation, which had been weeded out, these misleading papers were still freely available. Naturally, in the absence of the original and truthful memoranda, orthodox historians, who were oblivious to the existence of the former but were able to find numerous examples of the latter, naturally gave weight to the documents that had survived, little realising that this survival served an ulterior purpose: camouflaging the past. Thus, unwittingly, they contributed to the airbrushing out of history of the true story of the failed 'naval revolution'.

This account of how generations of historians were misled contains elements that are plausible. Anyone who has ever worked in the Admiralty papers knows that they are frustratingly incomplete. Indeed, the surviving docketts in the National Archives represent a mere two per cent of those that were originally registered, a staggering 98 per cent having been lost, mislaid, inadvertently destroyed or, worse, deliberately weeded as part of the department's notoriously over-zealous archival management process. Given the enormous scale of the routine destruction, the absence of particular papers cannot automatically be equated with a cover-up. Equally, however, the idea that some official papers might have been surreptitiously purged for being

embarrassing does not require too great a stretch of the imagination to conceive and, no doubt, there were documents that met a premature end for this all-too-human but deeply unsatisfactory reason. Thus, it can be conceded that some gaps in the record could have been caused in this way.

However, acknowledging such a possibility in a general sense is quite different from proving that it definitely occurred in relation to a specific set of documents. In this context it must clearly be stated that just because a particular topic does not appear to be the subject of any of the surviving Admiralty papers, this is not in itself evidence that any records have been destroyed. After all, there would also be no surviving documentation on a given matter if it had never formed the subject of discussion in the first place. Consequently, the mere fact of being unable to find records on a specific issue does not remove the obligation from the historian who asserts that documentation is missing, especially if the claim that it is missing incorporates the idea of a cover-up, of proving that such documentation definitely once existed. Fortunately, in the case of the Admiralty, ascertaining what was once there is not normally a complex task. Individual Admiralty dockets on specific issues frequently make reference to other papers relating to the same topic, normally citing the branch serial number or Admiralty Record Office title of the papers in question. Armed with this information, one can hunt for the cited papers sure in the knowledge that they once existed, even if such a search ultimately proves that they no longer exist today. Equally, much can be revealed about the former contents of the Admiralty Record Office from a close inspection of that body's run of indexes, digests and compendia. Contained within these big leather-bound tomes are details of the names, dates and contents, arranged alphabetically and also by subject, of all the files that were ever registered with the Admiralty Record Office, including those subsequently weeded. It is, thus, possible through the careful use of these volumes to ascertain what once existed and what, if now missing, has been destroyed.

The implications of this for any claim about a cover up are considerable. It means that to be in any way credible the assertion that the documentation for a particular topic has been destroyed, deliberately or otherwise, must be proven by reference to hard evidence of what was once there in the first place, with actual missing files being identified and named in support of this contention. Failure to do so must invariably make any statement about destroyed documents at best speculative and at worst invalid. Against this necessity, in several instances revisionist claims about the 'naval revolution' being deliberately airbrushed from the records appear tenuous or even unsupported.

Of course, it is not only on the destruction of key documents that the revisionist position rests; also important is the idea that many of the

surviving papers are not genuine expressions of Admiralty opinion, but were designed as smokescreens to obscure what Fisher and his associates were really trying to achieve. Over the years, this has proven an important explanatory device for revisionists. The proposition that much of the surviving documentation might not only fail to contain a true record of Admiralty policy, but might actually contain a deliberately misleading one has the natural consequence of allowing revisionists to dismiss a great deal of the surviving evidence, most especially that which runs counter to the thesis that they have developed. Now, so long as it can be clearly shown that particular documents are indeed propaganda pieces there is, of course, nothing wrong with this methodology. And undoubtedly it is on occasion possible to point to such subterfuge. No serious naval historian would deny that Fisher was a skilled advocate who frequently tailored his arguments to the needs of the moment. Equally, it is widely recognised that the Admiralty, like any other ministry, was more than capable of promoting its particular departmental interests through carefully written and self-serving memoranda. However, acceptance of these propositions does not imply that all Admiralty documents from the Fisher era were smokescreens. Much of its output was a genuine reflection of its internal thinking and can safely be used to determine this. The necessity, therefore, is having an objective means of determining which documents are real expressions of Admiralty opinion and which are propaganda. Unfortunately, there does not currently appear to be such a test in the revisionist methodology. Rather, the main criterion of judgement appears to be whether or not the document conforms or can be made to conform to the 'naval revolution' argument. Those that do are normally held to be genuine expressions of Admiralty thinking; those that do not are frequently dismissed as propaganda. Whether such a circular argument that blends cause and effect and renders motive and outcome indistinguishable is a satisfactory one is certainly open to question, not least because it leads to the bizarre scenario where historical documents are declared invalid because they do not correspond to modern day theories. A striking, but by no means atypical example of this back-to-front, overly teleological argumentation is Lambert's contention that the 1907 war plans could not 'have been [Fisher's] "real plan for war," since they lacked details relating to ... [Lambert's] theory of flotilla defence ...'<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this article is to reassess some of the key revisionist arguments in light of the methodological approaches adopted to make them. Particular scrutiny will be applied to the claim that parts of the documentary record were designed as propaganda for the 'naval revolution' and hence cannot be used as trustworthy evidence for an

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<sup>6</sup>Lambert, *Planning Armageddon*, 77.

alternative explanation of Britain's pre-First World War naval policy. Additionally, a spotlight will be shone on the proposition that key records were destroyed to cover up radical policies that failed to be implemented. Finally, the article will question whether the revisionist analysis stands up if the evidential base is not, as it is claimed to be, made up of misleading and propagandistic documents in need of prolonged and special exegesis to get to the truth, but in fact consists of highly important and relatively straightforward documents capable of being taken at face value and relatively susceptible of more conventional historical analysis. Space does not permit every revisionist argument to be assessed, so the specific examples that will be scrutinised are 'flotilla defence' and 'the technical-tactical synthesis.'

The 'flotilla defence' thesis was first propounded in detail in an article in the *Journal of Military History*. It was subsequently elaborated in the book *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*.<sup>7</sup> In these works, Nicholas Lambert argued that British naval policy in the Fisher era had long been misunderstood. In a major break with tradition, once Fisher became First Sea Lord, the Royal Navy, which had hitherto protected the British Isles against foreign invasion by maintaining in home waters a powerful fleet of large armoured warships, instead substituted a new system based upon the deployment of small flotilla craft. These vessels would utilise advances in underwater weapons' technology – especially the torpedo – to make the narrow waters around the British Isles impassable to major surface warships. This would not only be cheaper than relying on battleships, as flotilla craft were less expensive to build, crew and maintain, but had the further advantage of freeing the rest of the Navy for imperial duties across the globe.

Lambert's 'flotilla defence' hypothesis was forcefully argued and gained immediate traction, not least because it seemed to account for Fisher's apparently boundless enthusiasm for destroyers and submarines and also to explain how he planned to fulfil the promise that originally led to him being appointed First Sea Lord of keeping the Navy estimates within reasonable bounds. However, there was an obvious obstacle. If Fisher was the author of a radical strategy of utilising flotilla craft to render the North Sea impassable to an invasion force, then why during his period in office was this not reflected in the dispositions of British naval assets in home waters and the plans devised for defending the British Isles? Contrary to the expectations that 'flotilla defence' might create, instead of denuding the North Sea of armoured warships and redeploying them overseas, Fisher actually created a new

<sup>7</sup>Nicholas Lambert, 'Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904–1909', *Journal of Military History* 59/4 (Oct. 1995), 639–60; Nicholas Lambert, [*Sir John*] *F*[isher's] *N*[aval] *R*[evolution] (Columbia.: Univ. of South Carolina Press 1999).



Home Fleet, principally comprised of battleships of the newest type, and stationed it at the Nore, the only properly defended harbour facing the North Sea. Moreover, he then oversaw the production of war plans that rested on using these warships to engage hostile forces – invariably the German fleet – intent on attacking Britain. Thus, in these plans, major surface warships rather than torpedo craft formed the backbone of the protective system. If this was not already divergent enough from the strategy of ‘flotilla defence’, to facilitate the fleet encounter necessary for such a strategy to work, Fisher’s plans involved employing the very newest and best destroyers to form an observational blockade of the German North Sea littoral. Thus, instead of denying the narrow waters of the British Isles to enemy shipping, they were being used as pickets to warn of the egress of the German fleet and so bring about a climactic battle between a British force composed of large armoured warships and a German one similarly comprised.

That Fisher’s supposedly radical new strategy differed so markedly from his actual plans and dispositions might have been considered an insurmountable problem by the more fainthearted. For Lambert, however, the solution was straightforward. If the plans did not conform to the strategic concept that he had uncovered that did not mean that the theory of ‘flotilla defence’ needed to be re-thought, rather it could only mean that the plans themselves could not be genuine. Admittedly, in reaching this conclusion, Lambert was aided by a helpful trend in the historiography. The 1907 and 1908 Admiralty war plans have long been a matter of puzzlement. Peter Kemp, who published an edition of the 1907 war plans, had noted in 1964 that the very conventional strategy they espoused seemed strangely out of keeping with the technological advances of the Dreadnought age. He branded them ‘unrealistic’ and wondered if they had been produced with an ulterior motive in mind.<sup>8</sup> Others echoed this judgement.<sup>9</sup> This made it easy for Lambert to follow suit; and he did. The 1907 war plans, he explained, ‘were not real war plans’ at all. They were a ‘smokescreen’: hundreds of printed pages that existed purely because they ‘rebutted claims by Adm. Lord Charles Beresford ... that the Admiralty had no ideas on how to fight a war with Germany’.<sup>10</sup> While this assertion placed him in good

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<sup>8</sup>Peter Kemp (ed.), *The Papers of Admiral Sir John Fisher Volume II* (London: Navy Records Society 1964), xii and 317.

<sup>9</sup>Paul Haggie, ‘The Royal Navy and War Planning in the Fisher Era’ in Paul M. Kennedy (ed.), *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880–1914* (London: Unwin Hyman 1989), 117–32; Christopher Martin, ‘The 1907 Naval War Plans and the Second Hague Peace Conference: A Case of Propaganda’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 27/4 (Aug. 2005), 833–56.

<sup>10</sup>*FNR*, 180.

company, in a line of reasoning that took Lambert further than other historians, he extended this assertion of fabrication across several additional years. It was only with the production of the 1912 war plans, he argued, that one saw ‘the first attempt by the Admiralty to set down on paper the Royal Navy’s *real* plan of campaign in the event of war.’<sup>11</sup> In short, not just the 1907 war plans, but all the documentation produced before March 1912 that was purportedly on war planning was a ruse. That being so, there was no reason to consider why a large Home Fleet had been created by Fisher and why the observational blockade of the German littoral was the assigned role for the best and newest destroyers: none of this was seriously intended.

The argument had an inherent logic and was internally consistent, but it hinged on declaring a substantial body of documentation – documentation that told a different story – inadmissible. But was this actually justifiable? And how would it affect matters if it were not?

As has been stated Lambert was not alone in questioning the 1907 war plans. Despite this, there are grounds for thinking that the 1907 war plans, let alone all war planning up to early 1912, cannot simply be labelled as a ‘smokescreen’ and swept under the carpet.<sup>12</sup>

First, we know that the officer who oversaw their creation took the process seriously and regarded the plans as realistic and viable. As he explained:

War is not an exact science, and all plans of campaign are in consequence necessarily founded upon an estimate of reasonable probabilities, endorsed if possible by historical experience. ...

The [1907] plans ... were largely founded on the known opinions of several officers of high standing, embodied the results of much special attention, and reached their finished form with the assistance and concurrence of more than one practical expert. ...

It was for this reason, he further observed, they were given official sanction and formally adopted as the Royal Navy’s principal war plan:

In default of an alternative plan representing the views of a majority of experts, or of any demonstrable or obvious defect or

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 262. Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup>Andrew Lambert also regards the 1907 war plans as ‘a serious attempt to think through the nature of a major war in the light of the latest experience’. Andrew Lambert, ‘Sir Julian Corbett and the Naval War Course’ in Peter Hore (ed.), *From Dreadnought to Daring: 100 Years of Comment, Controversy and Debate in the Naval Review* (Barnsley: Seaforth 2012), 43–4. See, also, Shawn T. Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning in the British Navy, 1887–1918* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer 2012).

impracticality ..., they were officially accepted as applicable to the conditions prevailing at the time. They were originally drafted in an advisory sense as embodying recommendations only, but on acceptance the mandatory form in which they were printed and now stand was substituted.<sup>13</sup>

The officer in question was George Alexander Ballard. This is significant because Ballard was one of the most respected strategists in the Royal Navy, with unmatched experience in war planning. The author of several important studies of naval strategy, including a Royal United Services Institution prize essay, Ballard had been appointed into the Naval Intelligence Department (NID) in 1901 and had served there continuously for over four years. During that time, he had overseen the production of various appraisals concerning war against Germany. Such was his reputation for strategic acumen that he was the obvious candidate to head any committee seriously engaged in war planning, including the one Fisher set up in late 1906 to draft the 1907 war plans. Equally, when the government decided to place naval war planning on a professional footing by establishing a Naval War Staff in 1912, Ballard was the natural choice to head the war planning section, the Operations Division. No one else had his experience.

Ballard's high standing gives weight to the idea that the 1907 plans were not merely a smokescreen, a point reinforced by his claims in the above-quoted memorandum, but actually reflected the ideas of the officers most intimately associated with developing naval strategy. This idea is corroborated by the fact that it is possible to see considerable continuity between the designs sketched out in the 1907 documents and those that Ballard had produced previously when serving in the NID.<sup>14</sup> They would also be reflected in those that came thereafter. The 1909 war plans are particularly important in this respect. Until recently, these have been largely ignored.<sup>15</sup> One possible reason for this is that there are no surviving copies within the Admiralty papers at the National Archives, the Admiralty's own master version having been pulped in 1959.<sup>16</sup> However, a copy was retained by Fisher's naval assistant, Commander Thomas Crease, and can be found among his

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<sup>13</sup>Ballard, 'Remarks on the Framing of certain Plans for War with Germany now at the Admiralty', 3 May 1909. T[he] N[ational] A[rchives of the United Kingdom]: ADM[iralty papers] 1/8997.

<sup>14</sup>Grimes, *Strategy and War Planning*.

<sup>15</sup>This is highlighted in David Morgan-Owen, "History is a Record of Exploded Ideas": Sir John Fisher and Home Defence, 1904–1910', *International History Review* 36 (2014), 550–72.

<sup>16</sup>Digest entry for Case 0070. TNA: ADM 12/1466.

papers at Portsmouth.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the 1907 war plans, which, however unjustifiably, are susceptible to the charge of being propaganda on account of being set in print and widely distributed, the 1909 war plans existed only as a typed manuscript and were sent only to the commanders-in-chief of the relevant fleets and home ports. Thus, all the accoutrements of secrecy and all the details of a relevant and restricted readership lacking in the earlier documents are in place here, making the charge of naval propaganda untenable and their authenticity, in all senses, abundantly clear. So what do they contain?

The remarkable aspect of the 1909 war plans is how closely they resemble the 1907 and 1908 variants. While not identical in every measure, they are predicated on the concept of rotating flotillas of modern destroyers to mount an observational blockade of the German coasts to provide warning about a sortie of the German fleet. Backing up these destroyers, in case German light craft were sent to drive them away, was a squadron of cruisers. Supporting these, at a slightly greater distance, were the Royal Navy's armoured cruisers, ready to provide heavy cover should a concerted German effort be made to disperse the watching forces. Finally behind them were two battlefleets. The main one, based in Scotland and consisting of the '22 best battleships', would cruise in the northern portion of the North Sea, from whence it could both protect the northern part of the British Isles and steam south if warning were given that the Germans had put to sea. A second fleet, made up of the '25 next best battleships', would be based between the Channel and the Wash. From here it could cover the southern portion of the British Isles and again intercept a German fleet if notice were given that one was heading in its direction. Alternatively, in line with Michael Clemmesen's argument that British strategy was based upon the concept of a 'North Sea trap', the two fleets could coordinate their activities, with one meeting the German fleet in battle and the other cutting off any German retreat.<sup>18</sup>

The 1909 plans are the antithesis of 'flotilla defence'. They use destroyers for watching and rely upon a concentration of battleships to secure victory over the German fleet. Mutual sea denial is nowhere to be seen. Moreover, the 1909 war plans are not the exception. A straight line can be drawn between them and the 1907 and 1908 war plans, with the same concept and similar dispositions being evident throughout; and this is not the full extent of the continuity. From what we

<sup>17</sup>War Plan G.U. War Orders for the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Fleet, March 1909. N[ational] M[useum of the] R[oyal] N[avy]: Crease Papers, MSS 253/84/3.

<sup>18</sup>Michael H. Clemmesen, 'The War Room Managed North Sea Trap 1907–1916: The Substance, Roots and Fate of the Secret Fisher-Wilson "War Plan"' <[www.clemmesen.org/articles/Paper\\_CIHM\\_2012.pdf](http://www.clemmesen.org/articles/Paper_CIHM_2012.pdf)>.

know of the Royal Navy's operational thinking in 1905, similar concepts were articulated then. Likewise, Sir Arthur Wilson as First Sea Lord, at the now infamous meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence in August 1911, outlined a comparable scheme.<sup>19</sup> In short, there is a remarkable degree of continuity in British naval war planning from 1905 to 1911, all of which suggests that the surviving documentation is genuine and that it is 'flotilla defence' and mutual sea denial rather than the genuineness of the 1907 and 1908 war plans that needs to be called into question.

That the idea fore-fronted in the surviving war plans, viz. that the German fleet was to be opposed in Home waters by large armoured warships rather than flotilla craft, was the heart of the Admiralty's strategic thinking is further sustained by Fisher's distribution of naval assets. It is no coincidence that at the very time that elaborate plans were being drawn up predicated upon armoured warships, Fisher was creating the very fleet needed to put these plans into effect. In late 1906, at approximately the same time as Ballard was working on his new plans, the Admiralty decided to reconstitute a Home Fleet. While the new fleet would not come into being in its final form immediately – its development would proceed in three phases, the first of which would occur in early 1907 – its core would ultimately consist of the newest and most powerful warships. With its headquarters at Sheerness and its best fighting vessels fully manned at all times, this core would be stationed facing eastwards into the North Sea. As such, it was unambiguously intended for a future engagement with Germany. As Fisher explained, it was designed:

to bring in the newest ships now completing building into the Home Fleet, so that in April 1908 the Escadre d'Elite of the Home Fleet stationed at the Nore or Dover, with its exercising ground in the North Sea, will of itself be sufficient to cope at once with the whole German Fleet, while the Portsmouth and Devonport Divisions of the Home Fleet will be kept in such a state of preparation as to be fully manned and at sea in a few hours.<sup>20</sup>

As such, the unfolding of this scheme jelled harmoniously with the war plans then being written, which required a large body of battleships in home waters ready to take up stations in the North Sea at the first sign of trouble. The new Home Fleet provided this, thereby simultaneously

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<sup>19</sup>David Morgan-Owen, 'Cooked up in the dinner hour? A Reconsideration of The Strategic Views of Sir Arthur Wilson', *English Historical Review* (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup>Admiralty, 'The Home Fleet', December 1906. NMRN: Crease Papers, MSS 253/59.

shielding the mainland from invasion and creating the force to give battle to the Germans should the destroyers watching the German coasts warn of an impending sortie.

Taken together, the new Home Fleet and the 1909 War Plans suggest that the large body of documentary evidence dismissed by Lambert to validate 'flotilla defence' cannot be set aside. This is no small matter: reversing this methodological error has huge implications. When one recognizes that many of the documents discredited in the revisionist analysis are in fact genuine and provide a valuable insight into Admiralty thinking, then the continuities in British naval planning between 1905 and 1911 become striking. Indeed, they are especially noticeable for the Fisher years, which was the period when the major fleet deployments necessary to bring these plans into effect actually took place. The logic of this is that, far from downgrading the role of the battlefleet, the Admiralty under Fisher actually placed greater emphasis upon it, leading, somewhat ironically in the light of Lambert's arguments, to the criticism from Edmond Slade, the Director of Naval Intelligence, that Fisher could 'only think of war as an affair of big fleets'.<sup>21</sup> Such is the consequence of taking the documents seriously. The same point can be made with other revisionist theories.

As is demonstrated elsewhere in this edition,<sup>22</sup> one of the most problematic of the revisionist arguments is Jon Sumida's contention that prior to 1914 the Admiralty abandoned its attempts to develop long-range gunnery and focused instead on a secret plan for fighting at medium range. Referred to by Sumida as the 'technical-tactical synthesis', this posits that if the British and German fleets met in battle, British tactics would involve steaming directly towards the German forces with a view to unleashing a short but devastating pulse of fire at medium range, before turning away in order to avoid torpedoes.

While not always apparent given the confident manner in which the argument is presented, by Sumida's own admission this is a highly speculative hypothesis. Thus, while he insists that his case is a 'very strong' one, he nevertheless also concedes that it is 'necessarily circumstantial' owing to what he describes as the 'large gaps in the surviving evidence' and can, as a result, only be adduced 'by the standards of reasonable inference'.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not the case is 'very strong' is, of course, a matter of opinion, one on which judgments on this, as on all contested subjects, may differ. The admission that it is based upon

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<sup>21</sup>Slade to Corbett, 2 March 1909. National Maritime Museum: Corbett Papers, CBT/13/2/37.

<sup>22</sup>See the contributions by John Brooks and Stephen McLaughlin.

<sup>23</sup>Jon T. Sumida, 'Gunnery, Procurement and Strategy in the *Dreadnought* Era', *Journal of Military History* 69 (Oct. 2005), 1183.

circumstantial evidence and requires a good deal of inference can, however, be readily accepted. After all, no contemporary papers of any description have yet been discovered setting out, describing or even specifically referring to the concept of the ‘technical-tactical synthesis’. In place of such direct documentary evidence, the proof offered for its existence consists largely of Admiralty procurement decisions that, we are told, deliberately led to the acquisition of ships and equipment that, we are also told, were suited for the implementation of this strategy. That being so, the deduction made is that the ships and equipment must have been ordered with that outcome in mind. Even if one accepts this proposition – and there are compelling reasons for doubting it<sup>24</sup> – this is hardly conclusive. After all, many diverse considerations can affect the final specification of a warship. That it should end up after a complex design process suited for implementing one particular battle strategy could be a matter of deliberate intent, but it could just as easily be a coincidental by-product of the ship’s suitability for some other function, strategy or purpose. Without something concrete to link the two, effect is no proof of cause.

However, to a large extent such quibbling about the quality and implications of the circumstantial evidence is a distraction from more fundamental methodological issues related to the broader evidential base. While Sumida admits that his hypothesis is circumstantial, he attempts to justify this by claiming that it is ‘*necessarily* circumstantial’. From whence does this necessity arise? According to Sumida the reliance on circumstantial evidence exists because direct proof is unavailable. Given that the thrust of his thesis is about the preferred range at which the German battle line would be engaged and the tactical assumptions surrounding this preference, one might be forgiven, in the light of this comment, for assuming that no documentation from the leaders of the British battlefleet explaining their intentions in such matters has survived. Yet, this is not the case: a surprising amount exists on these very points. In particular, we have Sir John Jellicoe’s War Orders as vice-admiral commanding the second division of the Home Fleet issued before May 1912; additionally, we have the memorandum ‘Conduct of a Fleet in Action’ issued in March 1914 by Admiral Sir George Callaghan when he was C-in-C Home Fleet; finally, we possess the early *Grand Fleet Battle Orders* (GFBO) issued by Jellicoe on assuming command of the Grand Fleet in August 1914. What is

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<sup>24</sup>To give one example, Sumida argues that the Admiralty’s purchase of the Dreyer table instead of Pollen’s system was because the former better suited a medium-range engagement. Brooks conclusively shows that the opposite is the case. John Brooks, *Dreadnought Gunnery and the Battle of Jutland* (London: Routledge 2005), 69–70, 211–12.



remarkable about these documents is how logically they fit together and how easy it is to draw a straight line between them. Thus, in the first document Jellicoe called for fire to be commenced at long range:

A slow fire will be opened by guns of 9.2in and above at 15,000 yards providing the weather conditions and the motion of the ship permit. The fire will be quickened as the range and rate are found and decrease, and at 13,000 yards to 12,000 yards the maximum rate of fire should be established if hits are being obtained.<sup>25</sup>

In March 1914 Callaghan ordered:

For ships of the all big gun type in fine weather, deliberate fire may well be opened at about 15,000 yards; 8,000 to 10,000 yards should suffice for effective range at which superiority of fire may be established; ranges below 8,000 yards are to be expected towards the later stages of action in order to press home advantage and obtain decisive results.<sup>26</sup>

Then, in August 1914, Jellicoe mandated:

On a clear day and unless the enemy opens fire earlier, 13.5-inch gun ships will open deliberate fire at 15,000 yards, 12-inch gun ships at 13,000 yards. If the enemy opens fire at greater ranges ..., fire is to be opened at once in reply.<sup>27</sup>

In short, the documentation between early 1912 and late 1914, a period notable for being bookmarked by orders from Jellicoe, shows a consistent and recurring pattern, namely the call for fire to be opened at long range; it mentions no alternative tactics. It is this line of continuity that Sumida wishes to break with the ‘technical-tactical synthesis’. More remarkable still, given the very clear association of Jellicoe with long-range firing in orders coming from both the commencement and conclusion of this period, Sumida asserts that it was Jellicoe who made this change. As he outlines, as commander of the Second Squadron, Jellicoe:

<sup>25</sup>Jellicoe, ‘War Orders and Dispositions ... Prepared when in 2nd Division Home Fleet’, no date [before May 1912], in A. Temple Patterson (ed.), *The Jellicoe Papers: Selections from the Private and Official Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Earl Jellicoe of Scapa. Volume I: 1893–1916* (London: Navy Records Society 1966), 24.

<sup>26</sup>Callaghan, ‘Conduct of a Fleet in Action’, 14 March 1914. Naval Historical Branch: Backhouse Papers.

<sup>27</sup>*Grand Fleet Battle Orders*, Addendum No.1, 31 Aug. 1914. Patterson, *Jellicoe Papers*, 59.



*must have learned* from personal observation of torpedo exercises that a battle fleet that steamed on a straight course within reach of the new longer-range torpedoes would suffer heavy losses. *He was thus left with no other means* of being able to fire with effect ... except a medium range fight ....

From this he concludes that ‘Jellicoe *probably* not only embraced the new technical-tactical synthesis, he invented it.’<sup>28</sup> This would be fine if it could be proven, but no documentary evidence is advanced to support this; rather the whole argument is based upon inference. Thus, the obvious questions are: What if Jellicoe did not learn that particular lesson from exercises? And what if he saw other means of being able to fire with effect, German torpedoes notwithstanding? The obvious answer is that if he did not learn this lesson and drew other conclusions from his experiences – such as the need to remain out of torpedo range – then one would expect his orders from early 1912 and late 1914 to be based on the identical tactical assumption, namely that it suited the Royal Navy to fight at long ranges. This, of course, is what the surviving documents show.

If the documentation is so clear and the want of documentary evidence for the ‘technical-tactical synthesis’ so striking, how can Sumida explain this? The answer, apparently, is a cover-up. The fact that after 1912 the Royal Navy sought medium range engagements, but ended up fighting its First World War battles at long ranges meant that the British fleet was inadequately prepared for the conflict that actually occurred and performed badly as a result. Naturally, those that were responsible for this state of affairs sought to evade blame and so withheld information about what they had done. As Sumida puts it, ‘the story has not been told before because influential men had much to hide’.<sup>29</sup>

How were they able to do this? Hiding the truth was apparently easy. Gunnery tactics, being a highly confidential topic, very few indications concerning the Admiralty’s true intentions had been distributed outside of a select circle before the war – even most senior admirals and gunnery officers were unaware of them.<sup>30</sup> To do so would have risked a breach of secrecy whereby the Germans might have learnt of the Royal Navy’s true intentions and used this knowledge to thwart them. Accordingly, few records were made on this topic and those that were made were deliberately destroyed by men such as Jellicoe, who had the motive and means to do so. For them, Sumida argues, ‘suppressing the story ... was ... imperative’.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> ‘A Matter of Timing’, (emphasis added).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–8.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 114, 127, 132.

There is a clear logic to this argument, but there is also an obvious flaw. While the Admiralty would naturally not have wanted secret materials falling into German hands, that did not usually stop them from creating documents on sensitive matters – after all, how else could they convey their intentions and train the fleet? Nor did it prevent the existence of these documents from being recorded in the Record Office digests. Numerous surviving and highly confidential papers and their digest entries on ship design, weapon's systems, port and harbour facilities, wireless telegraphy, even intelligence procedures are a testament to that state of affairs. Yet, in this instance, not only is there no such documentation, but there is not even any evidence – at least none that has been brought to light – which demonstrates that documents concerning a brief medium-range engagement followed by a rapid turn away ever existed.<sup>32</sup> However, we do have documentary evidence of plans for long-range firing. This means that it is more likely that the absence of documents on 'the technical-tactical synthesis' is not the consequence of a cover-up, for which there is also no evidence, but a result of their not existing to begin with. In short, the documentation we have reflects what was intended – long-range gunnery. Likewise, the absence of documents on a medium-range engagement reflects the fact that it was never intended. This would also explain why Jellicoe's memoirs made no mention of such tactics – contra Sumida, he was not covering them up, they simply were not his intention – and why his Grand Fleet Battle Orders took exactly the same line as his 1912 orders – his views had not undergone any fundamental change.

According to the revisionists the 'technical-tactical synthesis' was a 'secret' plan; so, too, was 'flotilla defence'. Both of these revolutionary proposals could not be elaborated to wider audiences, but needed to be kept hidden. Neither could be explained after the war. This seems plausible until one understands that, to accept this proposition, we have to believe in theories for which there is no documentation and to disbelieve ones substantiated by large numbers of surviving records. The 1907, 1908 and 1909 war plans all stand in the way of 'flotilla defence', so they are branded as 'smokescreens'. Likewise, Callaghan's 'Conduct of a Fleet in Action' and Jellicoe's GFBOs are explained away as necessary exceptions from the practices advocated by the Admiralty, not true reflections of naval thinking. Such is the methodology of these revisionists: one in which conspiracies to hide the truth need to be swept away in order to uncover startling revelations. However, if we return to a world where important documents are kept precisely because they are

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<sup>32</sup>Sumida does show (*Ibid.*, 114) that we lack a full set of tactical instructions and battle orders, but what was in the missing ones is unknown. Nothing suggests that they concerned medium-range battle.

important and reveal rather than hide the intent of their authors, then a different story emerges. It has fewer ‘secret plans’ that can be unmasked only by the initiated, but its simplicity might just be a mark of its authenticity.

### Note on Contributor

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