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# Competing Narratives on Economic Warfare: The Unlikely Origin of Archibald Bell's Unwanted *History of the Blockade of Germany*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the controversies surrounding the waging of economic warfare against Germany in the First World War. It argues that two competing narratives emerged to explain the decisions taken by the British Government in regard to the enforcement of the so-called 'blockade' against Germany. The one favoured by the Foreign Office praised the diplomatic skill by which economic pressure was applied to Britain's enemies, noting that increasing stringency was enforced without provoking retaliation from neutrals; the one favoured by the Admiralty chafed at the restrictions that prevented a fuller exercise of maritime power. The existence of these two competing narratives, it is argued, made it impossible even a decade after the fighting was over to agree a text on blockade suitable for the published official history of the war at sea. As a result, the chapters on blockade, although written, were excluded from the published official history; instead, in the aftermath of a bitter intra-departmental dispute, a separate stand-alone volume that was produced and classed as secret until after the Second World War.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Royal Navy; official history; economic warfare; blockade; First World War

In 1937 the British government issued a new volume of the official history of the First World War dealing with the campaign of economic warfare waged by the Allies against the Central Powers. Entitled *A History of the Blockade of Germany and of the Countries associated with her in the Great War: Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey. 1914-1918*, it was written by retired naval officer and long-established member of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, Lieutenant-Commander Archibald Colquhoun Bell.<sup>1</sup> On the face of it, little about this was remarkable. The government had been releasing new volumes in various series of the official history over the previous 17 years and would continue to do so for some time to come. One more work, authored by a recognized government insider was, therefore, seemingly just par for the course; and yet, notwithstanding this, the official history of what was loosely, if inaccurately, called 'blockade' was an unusual production.<sup>2</sup> To begin with, there was the question of its circulation. The volume was graded confidential. Unadvertised to the wider world and unavailable for public purchase, it was sent only to relevant government departments and senior political and administrative figures and, even then, this was done with strict instructions as to the importance of guarding its secrecy.<sup>3</sup> To be clear, this was not standard practice. True, there was one other

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volume, military operations in Persia, that had also been withheld from the general population, but this had been an unexpected volte-face. Intended for publication when commissioned, it had only been reclassified 'for official use only' at the last minute, after the government of India raised serious concerns about a volume packed with information that could be twisted into Soviet propaganda. By contrast, the official history of blockade was always intended to be classified.<sup>4</sup> Given that one of the original and principal purposes of having an official history had been to educate the wider public about the broader lessons of the Great War, something that obviously could not happen if the volume was restricted, this was clearly a significant departure.

In addition to its limited circulation, there was also the question of its subject matter. It had been decided early on that the official histories would focus entirely on the major campaigns of the Great War and the contribution made in these campaigns by the various fighting and ancillary services. To this end, it had been consciously resolved that, while there would be volumes dealing with operations on land, sea and in the air, as well as dedicated runs covering seaborne trade, the merchant navy and the medical services, there would be no histories explaining the political or the diplomatic dimensions to the conflict.<sup>5</sup> And yet, here was a volume that said very little in its 845 pages about the armed forces, but focused instead directly, explicitly, and almost exclusively on matters political, diplomatic, and legal. Again, this was clearly a significant departure.

Added to this, there was the resourcing of the volume. Although all of the official history series were produced under the auspices of the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, they were funded out of the vote of the armed service whose role they highlighted. They were also written largely out of the records of that service. This volume, by contrast, was entirely paid for by the Foreign Office, a non-military department that, while certainly interested in the content of the official histories, had not previously sought to sponsor one. Now, somewhat unexpectedly, not only did it do so, but it also made its archive the major source. Once again, a significant departure.

Finally, there was the date this volume was commissioned. The initial decision to gather material for the official histories had been taken in the early days of the conflict, with prospective editors and authors being put in place shortly thereafter.<sup>6</sup> The decision to go ahead and issue contracts for the actual production of volumes had in most cases been finalized quickly after the fighting ended, the idea that 'an authoritative account of the Military Operations of the present War should be produced for issue to the public as soon as possible after the cessation of hostilities and that a Naval History ... should be issued at the same time' having been decided in 1916.<sup>7</sup> However, in the case of *A History of the Blockade of Germany* the formal commissioning of the study did not come until 1931, over a decade after similar decisions had been taken on the other official histories, making this volume once more something of an outlier.

Thus, as can be seen, *A History of the Blockade of Germany* was not a run of the mill component of the broader official history series, but a volume apart. This raises the question: how and why did a volume that it had never originally been intended to produce actually come into existence?

## II

The origin of Bell's work stems from the fact that the campaign of economic warfare waged by Britain in the Great War was almost from its very inception a controversial topic. This can be seen in the manner in which two diametrically opposing narratives concerning both its implementation and its role in the Allied war effort quickly emerged.

At one extreme was a triumphalist discourse that maintained that by cutting the German Empire off from overseas supply, British sea power had not just been an essential component of the Allied attritional strategy – it was the dominant cause of Allied victory. The argument was

made at two distinct levels. First, it was asserted that economic warfare had severed the sinews of German military power, undermining industrial capability in the factories, fighting strength in the field and domestic morale among the civilian population, all critical factors in the sudden breakdown of German resistance in 1918. However, no less significantly, it was also argued that the campaign had been a critical force multiplier. Under the careful guidance of the Foreign Office, economic warfare had been undertaken with such deft and sensitivity that not only did it provoke a desperate Germany to retaliate with the reckless gamble of unrestricted submarine warfare, but it ensured that when this happened the United States, a state that might well have been antagonized by British restrictions on neutral trade to the point of open hostility, instead joined the fight on the Allied side. As the distinguished diplomat, Sir William Tyrrell, put it, '[when] all is said and done, it was the Foreign Office policy that kept the door open for American entry in the war – an event which I understand contributed somewhat to our victory. That door would have been closed with a bang ... if the naval policy ... had prevailed.'<sup>8</sup> In short, the campaign was both an economic and a diplomatic success, one that crippled the enemy and brought in new co-belligerents.

This position had several prominent proponents. 'With all deference to our soldiers,' proclaimed former Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, in December 1918, 'this war had been won by sea power. It was by the constant, unrelaxing, ever tightening efforts of the Fleet ... that we had step by step drained away from the enemy forces their resources.'<sup>9</sup> As the politician in charge when the pre-war strategy of economic pressure was devised, Asquith might have been expected to adopt such a view given how well it reflected on his perspicacity. However, it is notable that he was far from alone in making this case; other voices, including ones that might have been expected to take a different view, articulated the same opinion. 'Germany has been broken almost as much by the blockade as by military methods,' proclaimed David Lloyd George, Asquith's successor and bitter rival, a statement made all the more remarkable by the fact that Lloyd George was never keen to hand his predecessor any credit. In similar vein, Ferdinand Foch, the French general who had coordinated the Allied military effort in 1918 and who might have been predicted to place the laurels firmly on the brow of the land forces he oversaw, nevertheless accepted that 'the blockade was 50% responsible for victory'. His American interlocutor at the time, Tasker Bliss demurred: '[I] would give the blockade the greater percentage.'<sup>10</sup> Echoing this was prominent geographer, Halford Mackinder: 'We have been fighting lately, in the close of the War, a straight duel between land-power and sea-power, and sea-power has been laying siege to land-power. We have conquered...'<sup>11</sup>

Yet, despite the many accolades showered on it, there was a counter narrative that, while accepting that economic warfare had been effective and while acknowledging that it had ultimately been war-winning, nevertheless maintained that because the campaign had not been prosecuted with all the vigour and determination that had been possible, the Allied efforts to crush the German economy had taken longer than necessary and that the war had been prolonged as a consequence. At the heart of this narrative was the divisive idea that while the cruiser squadrons of the Royal Navy had been busy intercepting suspect merchant vessels intent on trading with Germany and bringing their contraband cargoes into port for condemnation, the Foreign Office, out of fear of provoking neutral hostility, had been no less busy in securing their unnecessary release. This view had been commonplace among leaders of the sea-going forces during the war itself. 'I write letter after letter on the blockade question,' complained a frustrated Sir John Jellicoe, the Commander-in-Chief of the Grand Fleet, 'but the F.O. seems quite imbecile. They are afraid of their own shadows and imagine every neutral is anxious to go to war with us and can do us harm.'<sup>12</sup> Jellicoe's criticism was a private one, but it found its public echo in the popular press. There was a 'Blockade Farce' proclaimed *The Morning Post* in January 1916,<sup>13</sup> while the very same month, the *Daily Mail* complained about 'The Sham Blockade' and told its readers that this amounted to a 'Blockade Scandal'.<sup>14</sup> And they were not alone. What regularly featured in the dailies was duplicated in the periodicals. In January 1917, *The National Review* complained:

'Did not [Foreign Secretary] Lord Grey openly acknowledge that he had not dared to declare a lawful blockade of the enemy lest neutrals declare war upon this country? A more pusillanimous utterance has never been recorded of a British Minister'.<sup>15</sup> The same theme was pursued in the April 1917 edition. 'Responsible sailors,' it expounded,

have been known to describe their position as 'heartbreaking,' in that they had established effective command of the sea, but were not allowed to exercise it, and had the constant mortification of seeing hundreds and hundreds of cargoes released from their custody ... owing to our Government having made a series of arrangements with selected groups of neutral traders, not infrequently of German sympathies ...<sup>16</sup>

The solution, so proclaimed another edition, was simple: 'The establishment of a real blockade and a free hand for the Navy'.<sup>17</sup>

The existence of these two contending narratives was not just a war-time phenomenon. The battle continued into the inter-war years, a situation highlighted by the publication in 1923 of the book *The Triumph of Unarmed Forces* by Rear-Admiral Consett, who had been the British Naval Attaché in Norway, Sweden and Denmark when war broke out.<sup>18</sup> As such, he had possessed an inside view of Britain's efforts to ensure that war materials did not reach Germany *via* these crucial bordering states. He was decidedly unimpressed by what he saw. In his view, out of a misplaced fear of offending neutral sensibilities, Britain allowed all three of these nations to act as transit hubs for the import into Germany of vital supplies, supplies that often came from British sources and were dispatched on British ships. The consequences, he argued, were severe. By these means, the power of Britain's economic weapon was unnecessarily blunted and the war itself was needlessly lengthened by several years.

Consett was not a disinterested observer. As Naval Attaché he had frequently been in open conflict with his diplomatic superiors: he had criticised Foreign Office policy freely, had fermented disputes between the different legations to which he was accredited and, the Foreign Office suspected, had supplied information to *The Morning Post* to be used in their campaigns against the government's blockade policy.<sup>19</sup> Consett, by contrast, believed that there was a conspiracy in the Foreign Office to silence him and deeply resented that, at the Foreign Office's insistence, he was recalled as Naval Attaché in Denmark. As he informed the Director of Naval Intelligence, William Reginald Hall, he intended to ensure that his side of the dispute was 'thoroughly thrashed out' once the war was over.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, despite the obvious sense that Consett had an axe to grind, the charges in his book were taken up with enthusiasm by the same newspapers that had criticised the Foreign Office during the war. *The Morning Post*, for example, backed Consett's assertions, running a long article entitled 'Greatest Crime of the War. How British Traders Fed Germany'. It also published several supportive readers' letters backing Consett's claims.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, the story was picked up overseas, with numerous critical reports being published in France and Belgium.<sup>22</sup>

Needless to say, the storm surrounding Consett's book provoked a counter-reaction from adherents of the other narrative. The Foreign Office, for example, arranged for Aubrey Edgecumbe, a civil servant who had served in the War Trade Intelligence Department during the war, to write a critical review in *The Times*.<sup>23</sup> The review was in some ways generous to Consett, accepting that it must have been galling for a senior naval officer to accept that limits might have to be placed on the exercise of sea power, but it also spared no efforts to show why such discretion was absolutely necessary and how blind Consett was to that fact. The Allies' dependence upon American finance and war materials, Edgecumbe stressed, meant that no measures could be afforded that might lead to a rupture with the United States. Contra Consett, economic warfare had to be advanced gradually and with due care. A similar case was made in Parliament. In a debate in the House of Lords, former Foreign Secretary, Viscount Grey, expounded at length on the need that had existed for economic warfare to run in step with British diplomacy. The maximum pressure that could be exerted without doing Britain harm

had been the goal of the Foreign Office and, in Grey's view, had largely been achieved. As for Consett, Grey accepted that

when you are engaged in war the man on the spot with a particular duty to perform – and Admiral Consett was one of these – is perfectly right to be zealous to do his utmost, but he takes in only the point of view of the man at one particular spot. Unless there is at the centre some mind which can take in much more than the view of the man on the spot and see all the consequences which are likely to ensue from action which the man on the spot advocates – well, in this case we should certainly have lost the war.<sup>24</sup>

Such was the situation in 1923. Two competing narratives were in the public domain. The more positive was loosely associated with the Foreign Office; the more negative was loosely associated with the navy. This was the essential backdrop against which decisions would be taken about whether and how blockade would feature in Britain's official history.

### III

It must be stressed that from the contracting of the official histories in 1919 through to the Consett controversy in 1923, there was no thought of producing a separate volume on economic warfare. This was in spite of the fact that dedicated volumes on the matter had been commissioned for other purposes: a 'Naval Staff Monograph' on the subject had been issued in May 1920, while in June of the same year a *History of the Blockade Emergency Departments* was printed.<sup>25</sup> Neither, however, was ever regarded as being part of the official history series, each being compiled for specific internal government purposes. Instead, it was assumed that as the visible frontline of economic warfare had been the interception of ships at sea, any commentary on this would appear in the on-going official history series *Naval Operations*.

At this juncture, *Naval Operations* was a series in transition. Three volumes had already been completed and the story of the war at sea had been taken to mid-1916. However, this progress was interrupted when in late 1922, Sir Julian Corbett, the distinguished historian who had been compiling the histories, suddenly died.<sup>26</sup> This would have an impact on the future shape and direction of *Naval Operations*, particularly when it came to its coverage of economic warfare. In none of the three volumes released so far had Corbett made any concerted effort to write an overview of this topic, his focus instead being on such weighty controversies as the Dardanelles operation and the battle of Jutland. Furthermore, it was not clear how he had intended to tackle the question, although one speculation was that Corbett had left it because he 'felt that its real importance would be better brought out when the main operations of the Grand Fleet had been dealt with.'<sup>27</sup> By contrast, his successor, the well-known poet, Sir Henry Newbolt, maintained that economic warfare 'was one of the most important operations in the war and it was, in his opinion, essential that he should deal with it in his history.'<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, he sought to give this issue some prominence with at least two chapters on what he termed 'blockade' planned for the next volume covering the war at sea in the aftermath of Jutland. What Newbolt did not realise, but would soon discover, was that with this proposal he was entering a veritable minefield, one that it would be extremely difficult to navigate unscathed.<sup>29</sup> For in addition to the existing and long-running domestic controversy over the handling of the economic warfare campaign, additional international factors added several further layers of potential controversy. All of this meant that when, in early 1926, Newbolt completed the draft chapters and circulated them to the Admiralty and Foreign Office for comment, they were greeted with several challenging questions.

The first was whether it was expedient for the story to be told at all. The state of Anglo-American relations at the time made this doubtful. Britain and America were engaged in a long running dispute over financial losses to US commercial interests that had occurred due to British contraband control measures undertaken prior to American entry into the war.<sup>30</sup> There was a possibility that some or all of these might be submitted for arbitration and that other neutral countries might join the bandwagon. The potential cost of meeting these claims should

Britain lose the judgment was considerable. Even an agreed settlement could be expensive if pushed hard by the US authorities. The last thing that was needed, therefore, was a British official publication that strengthened American claims or inspired additional ones. Yet, in the view of many, that is exactly what Newbolt's draft threatened to do. Not only would the text revive historical controversies about British interference in neutral trade by 'order-in-council' that went all the way back to the War of 1812, but it would add new grievances by, for example, acknowledging that Britain had intercepted and read American commercial telegrams. Opinion in the American Department of the Foreign Office bordered on panic. 'I can think of nothing more likely to thwart our efforts...', wrote Ronald Campbell, a senior official there, before adding, 'The subject of the chapter itself, not to mention its tone, provides what would be a gift from heaven for the powerful interests pressing for the presentation of the blockade claims.'<sup>31</sup> This was strongly echoed by Robert Vansittart, the head of the American Department. As he put it, 'the whole text ... is simply full of material which it would be really disastrous to release at the moment when the whole question of the blockade claims is on the horizon.'<sup>32</sup> It was, as he explained in a subsequent minute, 'a matter of x millions sterling',<sup>33</sup> 130 millions sterling, as it turned out.<sup>34</sup> Opinion in the Admiralty was similar. 'It seems foolish,' wrote Alex Flint, the Assistant Secretary, 'to give our case away in an official document if America or Sweden or any other power presents claims for action which we took in the war.'<sup>35</sup>

The blockade claims issue was a transient one; it was a reason for postponing rather than cancelling the release of the chapter. However, there were other issues that suggested that it was inexpedient ever to publish this material. In the view of James Headlam-Morley, the Historical Advisor to the Foreign Office, making public the methodology of economic warfare could significantly prejudice British arms control diplomacy:

We cannot afford to tell the whole truth. We are simply providing ammunition which some day or another will be used against us by the combined nations of the world at a future disarmament conference, when they will put forward proposals with the direct object of depriving us of control of the seas. I can see a German propagandist campaign entitled 'How England wages war'.

He concluded that 'it was our wisest policy to say as little as possible about it.'<sup>36</sup> Vansittart agreed: 'I really don't see why we need publish all this anyway.'<sup>37</sup> The fact that there was an internal debate within the British government at this time about whether Britain should consider weakening its traditional commitment to maritime belligerent rights in order to secure better relations with the United States reinforced this. Making a controversial public statement about how the country had exercised such rights in the past prior to deciding how they wanted to do so in the future was simply inexpedient.<sup>38</sup>

Despite these arguments, they did not ultimately hold sway and no case was made to the Historical Section for abandoning rather than merely delaying the blockade chapters. That being so, the next question to arise concerned the content and balance of the chapters. Economic warfare was not just a matter of stopping merchant ships at sea, there was also the question of gathering information on global trade, making arrangements with neutrals to limit imports, prosecuting contraband cases in the prize courts, and dealing with the diplomatic fall out that might arise from these actions. The effective undertaking of economic warfare, thus, required not just a naval component, but legal, political and administrative ones, too. How much of this broader context should be reflected *Naval Operations*?

Up until this point, the consensus in the Foreign Office had been that a history of naval operations should contain a minimum of political material. This had been well understood by Corbett, whose volumes had garnered much praise in consequence. As one minute reflecting on Corbett's chapters put it:

In treating matters such as the Dardanelles expedition and the occupation of Salonika, the political points involved and the appreciation of the general situation in all theatres of the war are kept in proper subordination to the naval narrative, and at the same time brought into the story with great skill. I remember



noticing this when these chapters were sent to read and my recollection is that we had hardly any criticism to make. They are of course the work of Sir Julian Corbett who had had long experience and exceptional abilities as an historian.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately, this was not the case under Newbolt, and Foreign Office vetting of his chapters frequently involved heavy criticism for their overabundance of extraneous political matter. Headlam-Morley, for example, noted of Newbolt that 'he does not seem able to give an account based on the documents which would bring the political side in a subordinate position, which would have been more suitable in a work of this kind.'<sup>40</sup> Of another draft, he noted:

I am not at all happy about this chapter. ... the perspective and the proportion of the chapter is wrong. The writer has not the necessary literary skill and the historical technique. As a result we find him again and again drifting into a formal account of and discussions of purely political matters ... I should suggest that a letter be written pointing out that in the treatment of political matters the chapter goes beyond the limits suitable for and necessary to a naval history.<sup>41</sup>

The assistant undersecretary, Hubert Montgomery agreed.

Unless the reader was so informed, it would never occur to him that these chapters formed part of a history which was either 'Official' or 'Naval'. They are full of politics ... I think we should tell the Historical Section politely but quite firmly that we consider the Official History of Naval Operations should be confined to what its title implies with only the minimum reference to political events necessary to explain the origin and purpose of the naval operations.<sup>42</sup>

More forthright still was the Foreign Office Librarian, Sir Stephen Gaselee:

This naval history has already given us an infinity of trouble since Sir Julian Corbett's death and the time when it was taken over by Sir Henry Newbolt: it used, in earlier volumes, to go very smoothly – we were consulted on strictly political points only, and political matter was introduced only in the minimum necessary to explain naval operations. In the new regime we have to spend many weary hours disentangling the political threads which have been needlessly introduced.<sup>43</sup>

However, in a complete reversal of the position taken on other chapters, when it came to blockade, an entirely different view was advanced. The department's legal advisor, (Herbert) William Malkin, who was strongly of the view that economic warfare could not be understood without its broader context, argued that the first draft

assumes on the part of the reader an amount of knowledge of what might be called the legal and Prize Court side of the problem which he is unlikely to possess. ... I should have thought that it would have been worthwhile to commence the chapter with a general statement of the position from this point of view... If this were done the more detailed account which would follow would then fall into its place and be so much more intelligible to the ordinary reader.<sup>44</sup>

At Malkin's request, therefore, a 25-page contextual introduction was added. Malkin would subsequently describe these pages and the 'historical introduction' they provided as 'essential'.<sup>45</sup> The problem was that the consensus in the Admiralty was strongly opposed to this. By placing so much emphasis on background issues, a stinging Admiralty letter maintained, a very large part of the contents of the chapter was 'out of place in a History of Naval Operations of the Great War'. It went on: 'The History of Naval Operations was not intended to be a history of international relations, nor was it contemplated that the delicate issues connected with the rules of the maritime war code and their development should be dealt with.'<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the Admiralty proposed that the volume should stick rigidly to 'operations in which naval forces were employed, such as those of the Tenth Cruiser Squadron, East African Squadron, ships employed on the interruption of the Narvik iron ore trade, Rotterdam trade, etc'. The only concession made to the Foreign Office position was that the Admiralty would raise 'no objection to a brief narrative of the actual development and sequence of the measures for preventing the entry of contraband to enemy countries'. However, even this was 'subject to the proviso that it is free from



comment and that all discussion on international law and the policy of H.M. Government is avoided.<sup>47</sup> These two positions were fundamentally in conflict.

This disagreement also created a further problem; for a text containing significant politico-legal context tended to lead to a presentation of economic warfare sympathetic to the triumphalist Foreign Office-centred narrative on economic warfare, whereas its restriction or absence clearly advanced the more critical navy-centred perspective. The vexed question of how much background to provide, thus, inexorably led to an even more intractable issue, namely how Britain's economic warfare campaign should be judged and, in particular, which of the two contending narratives should provide the underlying basis for the chapter. Unsurprisingly, this was a subject on which there were strong views. The broad consensus in the Foreign Office was well expressed by Gaselee:

Throughout the war, the F.O. was subjected to grave criticism for the management of the blockade, criticism under which it had to be silent at the time, taking the form that 'the F.O. was impairing the efficacy of the Blockade by taking it out of the hands of the sailors, who could alone apply it with the necessary vigour.'<sup>48</sup>

To refute this, Gaselee wanted a narrative that explained the legal and diplomatic difficulties that limited the stringency of the economic warfare campaign so that the Foreign Office conduct in implementing it could be positively appraised. Given that much of the criticism stemmed from the alleged undermining of the work of the navy, having this view endorsed in *Naval Operations*, a series seen to reflect the stance of the navy, was especially desirable. Newbolt's account, Gaselee believed, did just that: 'Such criticism is effectively dispelled by the blockade chapters ...'<sup>49</sup> Hence his eagerness to see it in print.

The difficulty was that within the Admiralty Newbolt's draft provoked considerable outrage and it did so precisely because of the narrative it was felt to promote. The anger was most particularly felt in the Naval Intelligence Department. The officers there were firmly of the view that the policy towards codifying the laws of economic warfare that had been followed by the British government before the First World War, in their opinion at the behest of the Foreign Office, had been at the root of all the problems during the conflict itself. As a result, they reacted with hostility to Newbolt's text given its apparent defence of that policy. The Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence, Captain Kenneth Dewar, voiced his indignation. 'It is the height of absurdity,' he thundered,

that the Admiralty should place their records at the disposal of the C.I.D, Historical Section, in order that they may be twisted and distorted into arguments against the exercise of sea-power. The interpretation of blockade in this chapter might under certain circumstances be as damaging to us as the Declaration of London in the late war.

Far from being a history of naval operations it is an apologia for the Declaration of London and the policy followed by the Foreign Office during the war.<sup>50</sup>

Dewar's superior, the Director of Naval Intelligence, Rear-Admiral Alan Hotham, was even more forthright. He characterized Newbolt's interpretation of economic warfare as 'dangerously opposed to Admiralty views' and capable of doing 'untold harm'.<sup>51</sup> Recognizing that 'every word of this chapter will be weighed, every sentence scrutinised and the title "official" will return to us from Washington and Geneva', he was determined to prevent this. Accordingly, he stressed a key principle:

The responsibility of safeguarding British maritime rights rests with the Admiralty. The whole history of the Declaration of London, which was within an ace of binding this country to permit German trade to pass freely in war through Scandinavian ports and up the Rhine, emphasises the necessity of keeping a close watch on all doctrines going out with the label 'official'.<sup>52</sup>

Moving from the general to the particular, Hotham, like Dewar, characterized Newbolt's text as

an attempt to justify a policy which, in naval opinion, severely handicapped the British Navy, and if published in the official naval history, will greatly strengthen a similar policy in a future war. These opinions will be quoted as Admiralty opinions, although they were not held at the Admiralty, nor by Commanders-in-Chief, during the war.

This led to a very clear conclusion: 'If an official publication on naval operations presents any view on blockade, it should present the naval view.'<sup>53</sup> Others felt likewise. Rear Admiral William Wordsworth Fisher, who served in Hotham's place when the latter was admitted to hospital in July 1926, stressed that the 'Admiralty and not the Foreign Office is responsible that no doctrine should be preached, in an official history of naval operations, that is likely to handicap the exercise of British Naval seapower in the future.'<sup>54</sup>

As can be seen, the desire to use the chapters on blockade to impose a particular narrative split on departmental lines. The Foreign Office, to use the words of Gaselee, did not want its war-time actions to 'go down to posterity in the light thrown upon them by *The Morning Post* and Leo Maxse' [the right-wing owner-editor of *The National Review*].<sup>55</sup> The Admiralty did not want to propagate what it saw as 'pernicious ideas on blockade.'<sup>56</sup> Admittedly, this divide can be painted too starkly. There were officials at the Admiralty, such as Flint, who believed the Foreign Office was right to push for context and that the background information advanced by them was harmless.<sup>57</sup> Equally, at the Foreign Office, both Vansittart and Headlam-Morley concurred with the Admiralty that it was better to say as little as possible about the politico-legal aspects of economic warfare. 'I must confess,' wrote Vansittart,

that my sympathies are with the Admiralty on this. If there is the faintest risk of any trouble or difficulty over these chapters, I should gladly omit them. The advantage of instructing the public seems small in comparison, especially as I don't for a moment believe the public would read them anyway.<sup>58</sup>

Likewise, Headlam-Morley minuted 'surely the Admiralty are right when they maintain that the object of this chapter is not to give an account and explanation of the political and legal side of the blockade, but only the operations at sea necessary for carrying out the instructions of the Cabinet.'<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, such exceptions aside, the question of which narrative would prevail pitted one department against the other. An effort was made to settle the disagreement. In a series of face-to-face meetings in which Flint represented the Admiralty and Malkin and Gaselee spoke for the Foreign Office a compromise was hammered out. This was initially a source of considerable satisfaction in the Foreign Office, where Gaselee even congratulated himself on having 'composed the quarrel between the Historical Section of the CID and the Adm[iral]ty.'<sup>60</sup> However, this sentiment did not last long. After a length internal debate, the Admiralty disavowed the compromise. A furious Gaselee labelled it 'a piece of bad faith on the part of the Adm[iral]ty.'<sup>61</sup> Newbolt also cursed the Admiralty's 'deliberate breach of the agreement.'<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, a further attempt was made to resolve the dispute through outside mediation. In October 1927, Sir William Tyrrell, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, wrote to the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey. His starting premise was that 'it is undesirable that an official history of naval operations should appear ignoring the political side of the blockade'. To do so 'would be misleading [to] the present[-]day public and the historian of the future'. He ended with 'an appeal to you for advice in case any middle way should occur to you.'<sup>63</sup> Hankey's reply seemed promising: 'by the addition of a little new material, it might be possible to keep the substance of the present chapters and yet to render it acceptable to the two departments.'<sup>64</sup> However, the Cabinet Secretary's emollience was disingenuous. Tyrrell had approached him on the assumption that he occupied 'a somewhat impartial position between [the Foreign Office] and the navy'. The actuality was that Hankey, a Royal Marine lieutenant-colonel, who had once served in the Naval Intelligence Department, firmly supported the Admiralty's position.<sup>65</sup> As Admiralty Secretary, Sir Oswyn Murray, recorded, Hankey believed

that the less said on these subjects, the less chance there is of providing material that can be used against us in possible emergencies in the future, & that there is no real necessity to enter into a long discussion of blockade in a History of Naval Operations, [and] it is better not to run any risks by doing so.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, far from being a disinterested party, Hankey was in fact advising the Admiralty on how best to ensure its case prevailed. Consequently, he was in no hurry to assist the Foreign Office

and after 15 months of simply delaying, he delivered a verdict that was far from palatable in that quarter: 'My own opinion is that the present moment would be very inopportune for the publication in an Official History of chapters which must, I fear, prove highly controversial.'<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, this enabled the Admiralty to get the best of the argument. However, this was not in the sense that their view of economic warfare was published; rather they persuaded the Historical Section that *Naval Operations* should contain no account of the campaign at all. At their insistence, the two controversial draft chapters were held back from Volume IV and never made it into Volume V.

While this decision greeted with satisfaction in the Admiralty, the reaction in the Foreign Office was one of disappointment. '[T]he official history of Naval Operations is to come out in the form desired by the Admiralty without the F.O. case even being stated,' complained Gaselee, 'and we are apparently helpless.'<sup>68</sup> Could anything be done about it? One proposal was to threaten to publish a stand-alone history of the blockade. This did not reflect a desire for such a volume. Indeed, several Foreign Office officials were strongly opposed to this. Gaselee himself, while advocating this course in 1927 when the argument with the Admiralty was at its height,<sup>69</sup> later changed his views accepting that it 'would not really help us.'<sup>70</sup> Headlam-Morley noted that he hoped 'that no such official history will be written.'<sup>71</sup> Notwithstanding this, the idea was still advanced as a possible means of forcing the Admiralty into a compromise. As Gaselee explained,

the moment the Admiralty see this, they will be extremely anxious to keep the blockade chapter in the official history of naval operations, because in such a case they will have some control over it, while if it were published separately, they would not be able to exercise any censorship over it at all.<sup>72</sup>

This, Gaselee admitted, was in the nature of a 'bluff,' but he was sure that it was 'a bluff that will not be called.'<sup>73</sup> As events were to show, this certainty was not just misplaced, but rested on a misunderstanding of the Admiralty's position.

Gaselee's assumption was that the Admiralty regarded Newbolt's 'chapter as some kind of plot between the Historical Section of the C.I.D. and the F.O. to establish their views of the Declaration of London against the Admiralty' and were determined to ensure that their view was presented instead.<sup>74</sup> In reality, the Admiralty was determined to ensure that *Naval Operations*, a series widely understood to be an expression of Britain's official view on naval matters, did not associate the Admiralty with any expression of doctrine that could either prejudice the future exercise of British sea power. They were not, as one internal minute explained, averse to the Foreign Office perspective being enshrined in someone else's history:

The Foreign Office is quite entitled to publish its version of how the blockade was conducted and the diplomatic difficulties with which it was faced, but such an account is out of place in an official History of Naval Operations, especially as some of the views expressed therein may prejudice the exercise of our maritime rights in the future.<sup>75</sup>

The point was reiterated in interdepartmental communications. 'If a really comprehensive statement of our blockade policy is to be officially issued, the proper place for it is in a diplomatic and not a naval history.'<sup>76</sup>

The corollary of this was that the Admiralty had no objection to the Foreign Office sponsoring a full-scale study of the legal and diplomatic aspects of blockade and, accordingly, the Foreign Office bluff, far from providing a lever for Admiralty concessions, acted only as a spur for the stand-alone legal-diplomatic history that senior officials there claimed not really to want. Thus, when they formally proposed the volume, the navy offered no objection; and the project went ahead.

There was a fundamental irony in this. The Foreign Office were responding to their failure to mount a public defence of their wartime conduct in the official history series, by sponsoring a volume that, by dint of its restricted publication status, could not in any way address this. Deemed from the very outset to be too sensitive for general release, Bell's text, no matter what it said, could not educate the public about those difficulties in the exercise of economic warfare

that, at Admiralty insistence, had been omitted from Newbolt's volumes. This danger had been anticipated. As Malkin had observed when the idea of the stand-alone history had first been proposed, 'it does not seem worthwhile to produce a history which ultimately the Cabinet might decide was not to be published'.<sup>77</sup> Yet that is what took place. In 1937, such a volume would appear and, as Malkin had warned, it would provide absolutely no benefit to the Foreign Office in terms of public perception. Archibald Bell's *A History of the Blockade of Germany* is thus a testament to just how controversial a topic economic warfare was in interwar Britain and how divided, even within government, were interpretations of what it had achieved in the First World War and how it could be used in the future.

## Notes

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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