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Matthew S. Seligmann. *The Royal Navy and the German Threat 1901–1914: Admiralty Plans to Protect British Trade in a War Against Germany.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 208 S. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-957403-2.

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Armed Merchant Cruisers

This is a good book. Matthew Seligmann's brief monograph explores the spans that join intelligence, planning, and hardware into a common military enterprise; and a considerable human interest derives from the actions of some of the naval history's most significant officers–a history that works its way up to admirals Alfred Tirpitz and Sir John Fisher along with Winston Churchill. *The Royal Navy and the German Threat* obviously has much to recommend it.

One finds a world of irony here. Seligmann recounts, on the very first page, how a submarine sank the liner *Lusitania* with one torpedo early in May 1915. The shock of *Lusitania*'s almost instantaneous loss highlighted Britain's vulnerability to a German war against British oceanic trade; and critics still cite the sinking as "demonstrable proof of the backwardness of British naval thinking" (p. 1). Yet, the government subsidy that built *Lusitania* in the first place was a deliberate, considered response to what the Royal Navy and the British Admiralty thought they knew about the German plans to attack British merchant shipping. So were a great many other things that the navy did. And they were right.

Conventional wisdom argues that the battleship race is still central to an understanding of the naval aspects of the Anglo-German rivalry. Seligmann demurs from that conventional wisdom by taking the reader on a careful voyage through the official documentary record, even though that record suffers from attrition and poor archival organization. The Germans were indeed planning direct attacks on British seaborne trade, putting guns aboard large, fast express passenger liners conscripted into wartime service. The threat was real; the Admiralty identified and evaluated it, and then developed a multifaceted plan to deal with it. Along the way to that conclusion, Seligmann draws a fascinating second picture of the organizational and personal alliances and conflicts that shaped British naval thinking and naval policy before World War I.

When Germany began its campaign of expansionism at the end of the nineteenth century, its navy began to plan along two axes. The first, the battleship fleet that was the pride of the very Mahanian admiral Alfred Tirpitz, has received a great deal of attention. Seligmann's focus is the second, the program to build large, fast, express liners for the civilian trade, and to equip them for rapid conversion to auxiliary cruisers in wartime. These ships were fast and large. Designed to carry hundreds of passengers, they could carry provisions for long voyages without resupply; their capacious holds could carry enormous amounts of coal fuel.

They would be armed only in wartime; but the British feared that they could then attack from any direction, aiming at the widely dispersed navigation routes on which British imports depended. Britain would have to chase commerce raiders with some of its largest, fastest, and most capable ships; the Germans relished the opportunity to force Britain to disperse a fleet the Royal Navy desperately sought to keep concentrated.

Britain responded in several ways, not least by starting to match Germany's expanding fleet of big passenger liners with ships of its own that could be armed, *Lusitania* and *Mauretania*. It also developed new intelligence requirements, with a bureaucratic infrastructure to meet them. Britain's diplomats sought agreements to ban the use of armed merchant ships in war, without success; and Britain's shipbuilders began building battle cruisers. With a battleship's heavy guns, but with less armor and more speed, the new class could give chase to German raiders. When all of this had been done, however, neither the German attacks on British oceanic trade nor the British responses to them developed entirely as anticipated.

Express liners were not at all fit to be commerce

raiders. They were fast, but had nothing like the range British intelligence predicted. They were extremely expensive to operate, and with their great height out of the water they made excellent targets for any armed opponent. They might be fitted with guns, but they were not fitted with the centralized fire control gear that enabled a long-range naval rifle to hit anything. In practice, a group of German Atlantic liners, including those the British feared most, ran swiftly and quietly into American ports in the summer of 1914, to be safely interned for the duration. Battle cruisers might have been successful; two of them destroyed the German Asiatic Squadron, raiding its way home, at the Falkland Islands. But their battleship-sized guns and great speed made them an attractive addition to the fleet, too important to detach for chase or convoy duty. The additions and enhancements to intelligence apparently had the greatest success in protecting shipping.

Seligmann's stated goal is to recall to historical attention the British concern that Germany would mount a *guerre de course* against their island's vital oceanic trade; and he certainly has reached that goal, in a handsome fashion, based on the Royal Navy's administrative and political documents. At the same time, *The Royal Navy and the German Threat* opens some interesting questions. Why did fears of a guerre de course stop with auxiliary cruisers? Certainly the battle fleet understood the threat of submarines and governed its behavior accordingly. Why did this question not arise among officers who, as Seligmann tells us, were thoroughly aroused to a threat to shipping and intent on finding a way to guard against that threat?

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