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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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M. Seligmann: The Royal Navy

In 1897, for the first time, a German liner won the 'Blue Riband', the prized nineteenth century award for the fastest transatlantic crossing by a passenger vessel. A further three German-owned ships held the prize over the course of the next decade. In turn, the growth of German merchant shipping raised eyebrows in the leadership cadres of Britain's Royal Navy, where it was feared that should both countries face each other in a state of war, Germany's merchant fleet could be quickly converted into an unstoppable force of auxiliary cruisers: ships that could rely upon their exceptional speed to escape the Royal Navy while using specially added guns to sink unprotected British merchant shipping. This never happened: when the First World War began in August 1914, only four German merchant ships were converted for military purposes and, of these, only one, the *Kronprinz Wilhelm*, had any significant military impact.

Nevertheless, in this new book, Matthew Seligmann, a reader at London's Brunel University, examines how the Royal Navy dealt with the rise of German merchant shipping between 1901 and 1914. Seligmann begins his analysis in Germany. The book's first chapter uses the records of the Imperial German Navy to uncover the validity of Royal Navy officers' suspicions. It shows that despite Admiral Tirpitz's determination to build a battlefleet capable of assaulting the British in a major battle, along the lines advocated by the influential American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, there was a coherent attempt, especially on the part of the German Admiralty, to convert German merchant shipping to take the offensive against British trade in a naval guerre de course (a war against enemy shipping which seeks to weaken the enemy over time, also known as Kleinkrieg or Handelskrieg). In the book's second chapter, Seligmann crosses the North Sea to examine just how much the British knew about German plans, and the remainder of the book explores the most important British responses.

The first British measures, explored in chapter three, amounted to an attempt to match like with like: the result was the *Lusitania*, the passenger liner best known for its sinking by a German submarine off the coast of west-Cork (Ireland) in 1915, with the loss of more than 1,100 lives. Less well known is that the *Lusitania* was constructed following a 1903 British government decision to subsidize the Cunard line to build and operate British merchant vessels capable of rapid conversion to auxiliary cruisers for the purpose of hunting down their likely German opponents. The *Lusitania* subsequently regained the 'Blue Riband' for Britain in 1906. It was soon followed by the *Mauretania*, another subsidized merchant vessel that was to be ready for conversion at the outbreak of war.

These were, however, far from the only British responses. As Seligmann shows in chapter four, almost as soon as the Royal Navy and the British government responded with subsidies, plans were hatched to create a battleship capable of hunting down and destroying faster merchant shipping. The outcome was the battle cruiser, a category of warship that has often been criticized because of its proportionally high loses at the Battle of Jutland in 1916, when three battle cruisers were sunk by their better armored German opponents. By placing the origins of the battle cruiser in the context of their expected foe, Seligmann makes a valuable contribution to understanding why this vessel type fared so badly in an engagement of a markedly different nature.

The next two chapters, chapters 5 and 6, examine British responses from alternative perspectives; namely

those of international law, and military intelligence. At both the Hague Conference (1907) and the London Naval Conference (1909), Britain failed to outlaw the conversion of merchant shipping into warships in international waters because of German, French and Russian opposition. Chapter 6 turns to the subject of naval intelligence, and Seligmann shows how fears about the conversion of merchant shipping were partly behind the establishment of a new global system of naval intelligence. The book's final chapter returns to the theme of technology and examines how Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, led the Royal Navy's attempts to provide British merchant shipping with defensive armaments in the years immediately prior to 1914.

In contrast to the considerable historiography on the competition between the German and British Navies during the same timeframe, historians have barely examined the impact of German merchant shipping on the Royal Navy and its leadership cadre. As a result, this book is an important addition to the well-known list of studies of armaments and the coming of war. Paul M. Kennedy, The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860–1914, London 1980; Robert K. Massie, Dreadnought: Britain, Germany and the Coming of the Great War, London 1991; David Stevenson, Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914, Oxford 1996. It also allows Seligmann to intervene in ongoing debates between the 'orthodox' and 'revisionist' schools in British naval history. According to the former, Germany's decision to build a large fleet of battleships was the most important force driving British Naval policy at this time. In contrast, the revisionist approach suggests that the Royal Navy was undergoing a multifaceted revolution in policy that was caused by a range of factors. Arthur J. Marder, From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow, 5 Vols., Oxford 1961–1971; Nicholas A. Lambert, Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution, Columbia 1999; Christoper M. Bell, Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution Reconsidered: Winston Churchill at the Admiralty, 1911–1914, in: War in History 18 (2011), 333–356. With this book, Seligmann adds a new layer to these debates: he is able to show that the Admiralty was concerned by the problem of German commercial raiding, and that this 'core problem' (p. 171) was a fundamental part of how British naval planners viewed the threat posed by Germany in the decade and a half leading up to the First World War.

First and foremost, this is a work of traditional naval history: there is no new military history here. Instead, to read this book is to learn of the contents of memoranda, the deliberations of committee meetings, the minutiae of grand plans, and the course of war games; it is to think about technological change, and to dwell upon the actions of great, and even greater men (and, it goes without saying, no women). As a result, readers without a specific interest in this kind of naval history will find the book hard going. Historians searching for answers to questions about how naval planning was shaped by the broader political and cultural context, aside from a small number of remarks about public opinion, will find little of interest: rather disappointingly, there is not even a single reference to the approach adopted in the work of Jan Rüger. Jan Rüger, The Great Naval Game. Britain and Germany in the Age of Empire, Cambridge 2007. This is a pity because naval policies, and the identities of the officers behind them, were explicitly shaped during this period by the British public's consumption of naval theatre, including the choreographed displays of naval power that occurred when tens of thousands watched ship launches and reviews of the fleet. The case of the battle cruiser provides us with an important illustration of how this interaction impacted elite decision-making: it was fitted with guns far larger than necessary for its envisaged mission because of British public opinion. The lack of a broader discussion of the relationship between planning and the public consumption of naval theatre, and the absence of a drawn out comparison of what this study tells us about the complex relationships between militarism and civil society on both sides of the North Sea, are the book's most significant omissions. Nevertheless, specialists in British naval history will welcome this book as an important and meticulously researched new addition to the literature on the British naval elite.

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