

SHIPPING CONTROL IN THE GREAT WAR

In August 1914, most naval strategists were convinced that the war at sea would be determined by a decisive battle between the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet. Sea-power was directly equated to the number of dreadnoughts in each battle line.^[1]

This apocalyptic vision was never realised. After Jutland, the war at sea settled down to a war of blockade and counter-blockade;^[2] a war that involved not only battle fleets but thousands of cargo ships, fishing trawlers and coasters. A war in which merchant sailors, stevedores, dockyard workers, shipping agents and countless other civilians were intimately involved.^[3] In this war, victory did not depend on lines of dreadnoughts but on the capability to integrate all the maritime industries into the war effort. The key to this integration became the control of shipping and port facilities.

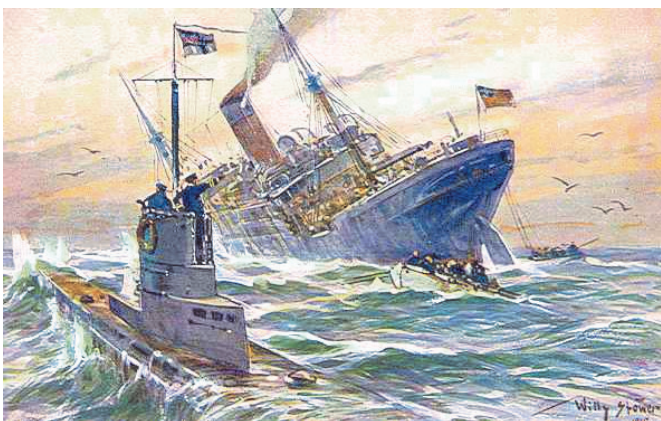


Figure 1 Postcard depicting U-boat enforcing the counter-blockade

Source: www.collectinghistory.net

Civil Shipping Control

From the commencement of hostilities, civil organisations were fundamental to the maintenance of the British maritime blockade and the defeat of the German counter strategy.

One of the prime objectives of the German *guerre de course* was to paralyse trade by driving marine insurance rates to prohibitive heights. The British were prepared for this threat. In May 1913, a subcommittee of the Committee of Imperial Defence was appointed to study the question of war risks insurance. On 4 August 1914, the Government accepted the scheme proposed by the committee. Under the scheme, the Government reinsured 80% of all war risks. Insurance clubs assumed the remaining 20% of the risks and received 20% of the premiums. The scheme was, in effect, a partnership between the State and shipowners for running risks and sharing losses. The scheme proved effective in overcoming the initial trade paralysis caused by the German *guerre de course*.^[4]

The British Government also recognised that wartime de-

mands would place upward pressures upon freight rates in the open market. To counter this, the Admiralty Transport Arbitration Board fixed a general scale of rates to be paid to different classes of vessels requisitioned by the Government. This scale was published in October 1914 and became known as the Blue-Book rates.^[5]

By the end of 1915, it became clear to the Government that stronger measures were required to ensure that all available tonnage was employed to the full advantage of the nation. In November 1915, the Board of Trade appointed two committees to provide 'tentative control'. The Ships Licensing Committee supervised all British tonnage not under government requisition, while the Requisitioning (Carriage of Foodstuffs) Committee was empowered to control shipping for the importation of food. The next month, the Admiralty appointed a Port and Transit Executive Committee whose duties included overseeing the improvement of conditions in British ports, preventing U-boat induced 'irregular congestion' (which was estimated to have reduced shipping capacity by at least 20%) and to prevent the recruitment of port labour into the army.^[6]

The problems, nevertheless, continued to mount and in January 1916, the Government created the Shipping Control Committee – a body charged with the 'general supervision [of] the whole field of shipping problems'.^[7] Unfortunately, this committee had no executive power. So finally, in December 1916, the Ministry of Shipping, headed by the Shipping Controller, was established, with full authority over all maritime industries as well as neutral vessels employed by Britain.

By regulations under the *Defence of the Realm Consolidation Act 1914*, the Shipping Controller had the power to requisition any British vessel, cargo or passenger space, irrespective of existing rights under charter or freight contracts. The Controller had full authority to control ships with regards to the trades in which they were employed and the type of cargoes they carried. He directed them to the port at which cargoes were to be loaded or discharged and also directed the consignees to the ports of delivery. The Shipping Controller had complete authority to control ship-building, repair, refitting and conversions. His authority covered docks, ship-yards, dry-docks marine engine works and other facilities.^[8]

By the end of 1916, virtually all British tramp steamers had been placed under full Government control. In February 1917 the Shipping Controller formally requisitioned all ships engaged in liner trades and paid them Blue-Book rates. The owners continued to run them and fill any space not occupied by Government freight, at open market rates.^[9]

Naval Control of Shipping

The Transport Department of the Admiralty was responsible for arranging transport for naval and military purposes and for preparing plans for the transport and supply of military expeditionary forces. Prior to the war, it chartered passenger vessels for the transportation of troops to imperial outposts. Each year it char-

tered some 300-400 colliers for the supply of the Fleet (although this was mostly sub-contracted to civilian agents). As such, it contained a cadre of officers accustomed to working with the mercantile industries. The Transport Department was assisted in its deliberations by a Shipping Advisory Committee made up of prominent shipowners.

The Transport Department also employed a number of naval Transport Officers at the major troop embarkation ports. These officers were, usually, retired RN officers but, as the war progressed, they were supplemented by reservists drawn from the shipping industries. By the end of the war, more than 900 Transport Officers were posted to 100 ports covering Britain, France, Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean, South Africa and Russia. Their duties expanded to include the issuing of sailing instructions, briefing masters and reporting casualties and other mercantile shipping intelligence.^[10]

The protection and monitoring of merchant shipping was the responsibility of the Admiralty's Trade Division. The Trade Division maintained a plot of allied and enemy merchant shipping, promulgated shipping guidance and advisory routes and monitored coal shipments. As the war progressed, the Trade Division developed an extensive responsibility in relation to the monitoring of neutral shipping.^[11]

On the outbreak of war, the Admiralty eschewed the convoy system, save for troop transports.^[12] In its place, it instituted a system of evasive routeing. The intention was to minimize disruption to normal peacetime shipping movements. Up to the end of 1915, all routeing instructions were handled by one officer in the Trade Division. These instructions were advisory only and were communicated to owners through the War Risk Clubs and then by mail to the Masters.

As the German *guerre de course* evolved into a counter blockade, the Admiralty increased its level of sailing and routeing guidance. A routeing organisation evolved, employing a variety of retired RN and merchant officers. In January 1917, mandatory routeing orders replaced 'sailing advice' and the organisation expanded. By mid-1917 the Admiralty's Route-Giving Organisation, later known as the Mercantile Movements Division, was virtually world-wide.^[13]

In 1916, a Shipping Intelligence Section was established to assist the Trade Division's monitoring tasks. This section, in conjunction with the Requisitioning Department, developed an elaborate card index system that permitted the monitoring of all ocean-going ships on a daily basis. Information was collected from a score of sources – from naval Transport Officers, ship owners and agents, marine insurers, harbour-masters etc. – and cross-checked. Each ship had its own data-card, colour coded by trade, upon which every item about the ship was recorded.^[14]

By 1917, the Intelligence Section was providing information to the Admiralty and the Ministries of Shipping and Blockade. In 1918, the index was incorporated into an Allied Naval Control of Shipping system and was utilised by the French and US shipping control committees as well as the Allied Maritime Transport Council.

The convoy system was introduced on the Dutch and French coal routes in July 1916. In May 1917, the Admiralty appointed a Committee on Convoys and established a Convoy Section to manage trans-Atlantic convoys. The results of this innovation bordered on the spectacular – 'Between July 1917 and November 1918, 16,657 ships were convoyed to or from British shores with a loss of only 0.71%'.^[15]

Convoy System

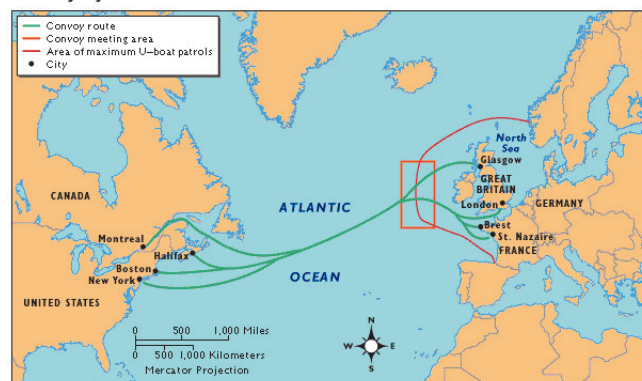


Figure 2– Transatlantic convoy system introduced in July 1917. Source: www.gr.hrw.com/venus_images

Control of Neutral Shipping

Before the war, about 34% of all British imports were carried in neutral hulls. The Norwegian, Danish and Swedish mercantile marines were of special importance. During the war, it was vitally important for the British to engage these vessels in the support of the British economy and to ensure they were not employed in the carriage of cargoes that could be transhipped to the Central Powers.

The British utilised their monopoly on coal bunkering to bend the neutrals to their will. Under arrangements fashioned, firstly by the Ships Licensing Committee and then by the Ministry of Shipping, neutral vessels were denied bunker coal unless they agreed to complete two subsequent voyages at the direction of British authorities. The Trade Division administered the system while the Shipping Intelligence Section carefully monitored neutral vessels. Any breach of agreement resulted in a denial of bunkers. By this stratagem, and with the further inducement of above Blue-Book rates, important tonnage was procured from Norway, Denmark and Sweden.

As the German counter blockade intensified, neutral Governments became more reluctant to incur the hostility of their powerful neighbour. Accordingly, the British employed additional means of coercion. Neutral vessels were refused port clearance except on a 'ship for ship' basis – that is, a given number of vessels of a neutral country were allowed to leave only when an equal number arrived.

In 1917, the British Government also relied upon the 'Law of Angary' an obscure principle of international law that held that a belligerent could seize national or neutral property in its territory. This law was used to requisition a number of Danish vessels and then the whole surplus of the Norwegian mercantile marine and finally 500,000 grt of Dutch shipping that was lying idle in US and British ports.^[16]

Allied Interoperability

The British initially provided assistance to France by allocating tonnage on an ad hoc basis and by not interfering with British ships on charter to French companies. In January 1917 an Inter-Allied Shipping Committee was created. It included representatives from Great Britain, France and Italy. Its task was to arrange a general plan for the allocation of Allied shipping (excluding Russia). While its work emphasised the necessity for allied control of shipping, the Committee lacked executive power and it proved ineffectual.^[17]

In December 1917, the Allied Maritime Transport Council (AMTC) was organised. From that time, the AMTC allocated



all the tonnage, both domestic and foreign, employed by the Allies.

‘Not a bushel of wheat, not a shell, not a man, was carried over the sea except by its sanction. England, France and Italy were secured their most necessary imports. Expeditionary forces in Salonika, Mesopotamia and Palestine were maintained at strength. Two million American troops were safely landed in France.’^[18]

Conclusions

Full control of shipping is now considered anachronistic. It has little place in the limited wars of the current era. Nevertheless, the British experience in WWI may have some continuing relevance. Firstly, the experience demonstrates that sea-power is more than fleet power. If there is a pervasive navalist culture based upon the primacy of battle to the exclusion of most other factors, as Prof. Vego^[19] of the US Naval War College contends, then these cultural blinkers must be removed. The capacity to seamlessly mobilise and integrate the maritime resources of the nation, and for that matter of allied, friendly and neutral nations, remains of crucial importance to the exercise of sea-power. Current maritime interdiction operations, anti-piracy, general constabulary and crisis response operations demonstrate the value of this capability. Secondly, this military/civilian co-operation both at a national and multi-national level cannot be improvised. A sound structure for co-operation and co-ordination must exist and must be routinely exercised both nationally and internationally.

End Notes

1. P.G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (UK: Routledge, 1994) pp 1-20
2. Great Britain never formally declared a blockade during WWI. As the RN was not able to maintain forces in the Baltic, Britain could not prevent ocean trade between Germany and Scandinavia and, therefore, within the terms of both the Declaration of Paris and the Declaration of London, the blockade could not be ‘effective’ i.e. legal under int. law – see M. Parmalee, *Blockade and Sea Power: The Blockade, 1914-1919, and Its Significance for a World State* (NY: Thomas Crowell 1924) p. 38 [Parmalee chaired the US Shipping Control Committee].
3. Losses of Allied and Neutral merchant vessels between 1914-1918 from enemy action amounted to 12,543,393 grt. The number of merchant sailors killed exceeded 30,000 – source: J.A. Salter, *Allied Shipping Control: An Experiment in International Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921) pp 355-359
4. P.G. Halpern *op cit* p 68
5. J.A. Salter *op cit* pp 43-44
6. J.A. Salter *op cit* pp 49-54
7. J.A. Salter *op cit* p 64
8. C. Ernest Fayle, *War and the Shipping Industry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1927), p 416 & Salter, *op cit* p 70-75
9. J.A. Salter *op cit* p 72
10. J. A. Salter *op cit* p 22
11. *Ibid*

12. Earl Jellicoe, *The Submarine Peril: The Admiralty Policy in 1917* (London: Cassell & Co, 1934), pp 96-120; For a critique of this position see Marder, *Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* Vol 4 pp 145, 150-152.
13. C. Ernest Fayle, *Seaborne Trade* (London: John Murray, 1920-24) Vol. III p 346
14. J.A. Salter *op cit* p 56
15. L.E. Davis & S.L. Engerman, *Naval Blockades in Peace & War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006) p 187
16. T. Thorsteinsson, *Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Iceland in the World War* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1930) and Salter *op cit* pp 102 - 108
17. J.A. Salter *op cit* pp 136-143
18. A. Offer, *The First World War: An Agrarian Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p220
19. M. Vego, *Trade Protection*, Armed Forces Journal November 2008



Figure 3 Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz assumed that the RN would maintain a close blockade on the German coast. This would give the new coastal defences (U-boats and mines) and weather the chance to deplete the Grand Fleet. He then planned to sortie the High Seas Fleet and, in a decisive battle, crush British naval power for all time.

Source: www.stefanjacob.de

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