

SEA WARFARE TODAY

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LONDON
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FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1940

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
UNWIN BROTHERS LTD., WOKING

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of this little book is to give, in simple terms, a general idea of the material and methods by which sea war is waged today. The conflict into which Hitlerism has plunged this country had been in progress for barely six months when the Censor's Office speedily returned the final pages of the manuscript, and it might appear rather early to attempt any assumptions as to what may yet emerge to support the initial forecast that 'this war was going to prove quite unlike any other war at sea.' Hence the scope of the book in this direction is very restricted. But one supreme fact had already emerged in a tremendous re-affirmation; the unshaken dominance of British sea power and the assurance which this holds of ultimately 'breaking their hearts,' in the characteristic phrase of Mr. Winston Churchill. The oldest of all naval strategical doctrines is that 'methods change but principles remain,' and in the following pages an attempt is made to demonstrate how this evolutionary truism is perpetuated in the Fleet of today and in the assigned functions of the numerous categories of which that Fleet is composed.

CONTENTS

I	Sea War 'As a Whole'	11
II	Between the Wars	18
III	The Navy's Task Today	26
IV	The Spearhead of Sea Power	36
V	'Ships of Opportunity'	45
VI	The Flotilla Craft	55
VII	The Minor Craft	65
VIII	Weapons and Training	76
IX	The Economic Warfare	85
X	The Nazi Outlook	98
XI	Much That is Different; Little New	110

SEA WARFARE TODAY

Previous works by Sir Herbert Russell

WITH THE PRINCE IN THE EAST

THE DELECTABLE WEST

THE LONGSHOREMAN

TRUE BLUE

CHAPTER ONE

SEA WAR 'AS A WHOLE'

THE oft-repeated *cliché* of the past twenty years, that 'Great Britain is no longer an island,' resulted in a good deal of confused thinking on the subject of sea power. Popular impression took the form of an uneasy conclusion that we had lost our moat and, with it, that security which down the centuries had been realized as the primary benefit of our insularity. But since, geographically, the insularity remained it was rather vaguely assumed that the obvious disadvantages of isolation were accentuated by the change. The truism that we should be reduced in a few weeks, if we lost command of the sea communications, took on a more ominous note in view of the growing misgiving that the Royal Navy would prove unequal to guarding adequately the trade routes against the rapidly growing menace of air power. When, in 1936, Germany voluntarily undertook to limit her naval strength to 35 per cent of the total tonnage of the British Navy, on which basis a treaty between the two countries was signed, the apparent concession of permanent overwhelming superiority only stimulated the uneasy feeling that sea power no longer counted as it did.

This phase of disquieting doubt reached its peak point during the period of tension between Great Britain and Italy which developed out of the Abyssinian War. The 'air-minded' school in this country was insistent in prophetic warnings, in Parliament and the Press. It preached the doctrine that it was sheer waste of money to build any more battleships which could be sunk at will by a torpedo-bomber. Lord Strabolgi, whose utterance claimed the more attention owing to his naval career, declared in the House of Lords that one thousand warplanes could be built for the cost of one capital ship and that it was pure lunacy to hesitate in the choice of policy. On this point of comparative cost more anon.

Quite unperturbed by the rather childish gibes at them, the 'brass-bound old fossils' with whom lay the ordering of our Fleet did their own thinking. So clearly did they realize the influence of air power upon future sea warfare that during all this long period of controversy they were steadily working for unfettered control of the Fleet Air Arm, then vested in the Air Ministry, which was finally conceded to the Admiralty in 1938. But throughout the Sea Lords preserved a sense of proportion. 'Hitlerism' was already casting its menacing shadow over Europe and the 'next war' was becoming a grim threat. How was that 'next war' to be met by sea? How far would it follow the lines of the last war and how far might it prove different from anything which had gone before? In the attempt to answer this question lies the purpose of this volume.

Broadly speaking, the Fleet of a great naval Power at

any given period materializes the foreign policy of that country. Its composition is determined, as far as possible, in response to a definite objective. 'As far as possible' because a great Fleet in Being cannot be wholly transformed under a long period to meet the particular character of the Fleet of any potential enemy, particularly when, as in the case of the Navy of Nazi Germany, that Fleet is in an elementary state. The posture of world affairs when the Admiralty were called upon to frame the great Naval Rearmament Programme presented a colossal problem for they were confronted by the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo 'Axis.' As against this truly formidable grouping they had abundant reassurance that the French Navy might be counted a faithful ally. Here was a strategical hypothesis embodying three widely-separated war zones, in each of which are vast British Empire interests to be defended. The avowed ambitions of these respective Powers were as follow: Germany, to dominate the Baltic and be in a position to dispute command of the North Sea with any nation; Italy, to dominate the Mediterranean; Japan, the hegemony of the Western Pacific. There was no particular naval rivalry between the three States and none was building in definite competition with either of the others.

Germany figures most conspicuously in the deliberations upon which the British Admiralty based the great Naval Rearmament Programme. That country had already the 'pocket battleship' type whilst still adhering to the limitations imposed by the Versailles Treaty. These vessels, known as the *Deutschland* class, attracted

much attention when details of their design became known. Actually, they are miniature capital ships, heavily armed for their size, poorly protected for their category and driven by motors which give them a speed higher than that of any battleship but substantially inferior to that of any battle-cruiser.

The general impression was that the German naval architects had done remarkably well in producing such a formidable battleship upon such restricted displacement. To our own Naval Staff the new type appealed in quite another way than as a normal Fleet unit. Nominally a battleship, she was obviously unsuited to lie in the line against the great, heavily-armoured vessels of that category possessed by the principal sea Powers. Her extraordinary mobility, credited as 16,000 miles at economic speed, suggested to the naval mind that in the event of war she was destined for a role which is certainly not included in the traditional functions of the capital ship. In fact, the type was promptly 'ticked off' by the British Admiralty as dedicated to trade raiding on the High Seas.

There was nothing novel in this idea to justify any suggestion that it represented a new step in modern sea warfare. But the conclusion, stressed as it was by a new class of ship, served to underline the real purport of Germany's naval building policy. This could not hope to aim at the destruction of the British Fleet; at another and more decisive Jutland. Indeed, it indicated the intention to renounce the major engagement in future sea warfare and to concentrate all efforts upon the means of striking at the vital trade of Great Britain. That, in any

case, this would be the policy of the weaker naval Power was a foregone conclusion with the British Naval Staff, but it is true to say that they did not realize how thoroughly Germany was preparing to carry it out until they discovered that the Nazi Government had been secretly building submarines in flagrant violation of treaty obligations. With this discovery the road was pretty clear for formulating a response to Germany's plans.

The much bigger Fleets of Italy and Japan were constituted, like our own, on traditional principles. That is to say, they were not restricted to types specially designed for one particular form of waging war. Both countries possessed large numbers of submarines, but it did not call for a deep study of their strategical positions on the map to support the assumption that these were primarily intended for defensive purposes. Put in another way, the British Admiralty found no reason to conclude that either Italy or Japan, or both, would launch an unrestricted submarine campaign upon focal points of our trade routes as the chief feature of war against this country. This is not to deny the certainty of every effort to cripple our trade to the utmost, which is legitimate war; the point is that the purpose was not so unmistakably defined as in the case of Germany.

A general understanding of the Admiralty view as to campaign planning by potential opponents such as is summarized in the foregoing paragraphs is an essential corollary to any study of sea warfare of today. Not only in building programmes and the addition of new types of ships to the fleet is the work of preparation for meeting

foregone conditions to be seen. The methods by which a clever and totally unscrupulous enemy may attempt to materialize those conditions have to be divined, as far as possible. Surprises for the foe are an eminently desirable feature of war preparations. Much of what is achieved in the laboratory, the factory benches, and the instructional schools leaves no visible mark upon the output of the shipyards. Yet it is here that the evolution of sea warfare is ceaselessly going on, producing results which may presently reveal themselves in strange departures from long accepted tactical principles and astonishing examples of 'the triumph of mind over matter.' Through it all runs one immutable truth; that naval warfare is an unending contest between the menace and the antidote. But the menace must be revealed before the antidote can be devised.

It was not long in the present war before the Germans received very practical reminders of this truism. They had made preliminary preparations to begin where they left off in the last war and within a few hours of the outbreak of hostilities they committed their first act of unrestricted submarine warfare by sinking the British liner *Athenia*. They were soon to learn that we were not carrying-on from the point at which we left off in 1918. The menace itself had changed but little during two decades; in her salient features the submarine of today is virtually the same as her predecessor of 1918. But the 'answer' to the submarine—otherwise the 'collective antidotes'—have developed to a striking degree. Life in these craft has become a nightmare. The crew of every U-boat cover their spanners with rubber, wear noiseless

shoes and talk in whispers, so apprehensive are they of the deadly efficiency of our sound detection. They live under a haunting sense of being stalked and an ever-present dread of the crash of a depth charge. The very efforts of the Nazi High Command to conceal losses only defeat themselves and the list of those who have not returned, and never will, becomes exaggerated as inquiry passes from mouth to mouth in the U-boat home ports.

When we speak of sea warfare of today we naturally have in mind the conflict between Great Britain and France on the one hand and Germany on the other. Naval war is now waged in three dimensions: on the sea, over the sea, under the sea. The Allies, by virtue of their very superior strength, would much prefer 'to come out into the open.' The Germans seek to redress their inferiority by the methods of 'the unseen hand.' From this broad distinction has arisen most of the 'latest ideas' which are emerging in the conduct of the present struggle at sea.