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German Warships of World War I: The Royal Navy's Official Guide to the Capital Ships, Cruisers, Destroyers, Submarines and Small Craft, 1914-1918

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the importance of joint operations today.

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From 1898 to 1918 Great Britain faced a bold, aggressive new challenger in the North Sea. Gradually the British government and the Royal Navy were forced to abandon their focus on empire to confront the upstart German Empire, with its new High Seas Fleet. Accordingly, intensive British intelligence efforts were directed at the rival fleet.

German Warships of World War I shows the result of those efforts. It is a hefty reference work compiled from the Royal Navy's Confidential Books, which were standard issue on ships of the Grand Fleet throughout the war. The books were later passed on to the U.S. Navy, so the data in these pages represent the sum total of Allied knowledge of the German fleet on the eve of the Armistice. The book is divided by ship class and includes in-depth analysis of German tactics and countless specifications and illustrations. *German Warships* is a fascinating look at technology in transition, and, more significantly, its assessment of the High Seas Fleet explains several important strategic decisions by British leaders.

The Confidential Books portray a modern fleet that posed a serious challenge to British maritime supremacy. German ships were designed to withstand punishment and were superior to their British counterparts in compartmentation. Still, *German Warships* (unintentionally) exposes the limitations of even the best intelligence collecting efforts. Norman Friedman comments in his introduction that British experts after the war were surprised to find stereo rangefinders on German battleships. This discovery explained the puzzling failure of British optical countermeasures, which were designed to frustrate *coincidence* rangefinders. On balance, German warships were the equals of any flying the White Ensign.

This work also provides insight into the British strategic dilemma. After the 1898 German Navy Laws, it gradually became apparent that the new fleet was not intended for colonial defense, despite Kaiser Wilhelm's statements to the contrary. Instead of a fleet of cruisers—useful for colonial defense—Germany planned a fleet of forty-one powerful battleships ill suited for overseas assignments. While heavily gunned, the new ships were cramped and short on endurance. The battleship fleet was clearly designed to contest British dominance in the North Sea.

For its part, the Royal Navy could not both meet the German challenge and sustain large squadrons overseas. The result was an alliance with Japan and a naval agreement with France, which allowed First Sea Lord Sir John

Fisher to concentrate the fleet in home waters. From that point on, Britain focused exclusively on its continental rival.

During the First World War Britain abandoned its hopes for a new Trafalgar. Again, the reason was its assessment of the German naval threat. Mines, torpedoes, and submarines compelled British admirals to rethink an "Armageddon in the North Sea" between opposing fleets of battleships. Their fear was understandable: in one day in September 1914, for instance, a single U-boat sank the armored cruisers *Cressy*, *Hogue*, and *Aboukir*. At the Battle of Jutland, moreover, Vice Admiral Reinhard Scheer's desperate torpedo attack forced the mighty British battle line to turn away. This provided Scheer his chance to break off the action. The British commander, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, settled on a "distant blockade" strategy and, in effect, ceded control of the North Sea to Germany unless his battleships were accompanied by fleets of destroyers.

The submarine threat was perhaps the most ominous. A look at *German Warships* illustrates the overwhelming superiority of German U-boats over Allied submarines. The endurance of German boats was measured in months, as opposed to a couple of weeks for British and American craft. The German submarine quickly evolved from a coastal defense boat into a direct threat to the Royal Navy's supremacy and British economic lifelines. Consequently, the U-boat and German skippers' tactics were the subject of intensive analysis in the Confidential Books. Had they paid attention, that would have been fortunate for the Allies, as U-boats tactics from 1914 to 1918 were the foundation for German submarine operations in the Second World War.

German Warships of World War I is a glimpse of the evolution of naval warfare. The book offers fascinating insight into the impact of technology and intelligence efforts on military strategy. For the student of strategy as well as the naval architect, it is a valuable reference.

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Williams, William J. *The Wilson Administration and the Shipbuilding Crisis of 1917: Steel Ships and Wooden Steamers*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992. 220pp. $69.95

By the spring of 1916 the German U-boat campaign, initiated in the early months of World War I, had become so effective that ships were sunk faster than they could be built. While American shipyards prospered, they could not meet the insatiable demand for merchant shipping, which in turn caused international freight rates to soar, seriously hampering U.S. trade with other nations. In its endeavors to solve the shipping crisis, the Wilson administration proposed a government program for building certain types of merchant vessels that it claimed would also be suitable for use as naval auxiliaries. Although the administration talked about the need for naval preparedness, its primary interest was trade. Cargo ships would come first; the main task of the