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## The Wilson Administration and the Shipbuilding Crisis of 1917: Steel Ships and Wooden Steamers

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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

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government's fleet would be not to support the Navy but to force reductions in overseas shipping rates. The administration's efforts to lobby Congress on behalf of business and trade interests were ultimately successful, with the passage of the Shipping Act in the fall of 1916.

An important provision of the new act was the establishment of the United States Shipping Board—an independent agency of the government that would have sweeping authority over the nation's merchant marine. Composed of five commissioners appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate, the Shipping Board was granted extraordinary power over the shipping industry and was even authorized to form a subsidiary corporation (later named the Emergency Fleet Corporation) for the "purchase, construction, equipment, lease, charter, maintenance, and operation of merchant vessels in the commerce of the United States." Although passed as an "emergency measure," the Shipping Act of 1916 would indicate the course of the American merchant marine and the shipbuilding industry in the United States for nearly two decades.

After the United States declared war on Germany, the Shipping Board was charged with the monumental challenge of mobilizing the already strained capacity of the shipbuilding industry. It was an effort to combat the effects of unrestricted submarine warfare, which was close to cutting off the supply of goods to Great Britain and the Allies. Although it appeared as if the outcome of the war would depend upon the nation's ability to increase dramatically

the number of shipyards and vessels under construction therein, the Shipping Board was unable to act, because of the political infighting that developed within its own ranks. What transpired during this key period of the war, and the reasons behind the failure of the Shipping Board to take prompt action, are the main subjects of this book.

William J. Williams has done an admirable job in documenting this seldom discussed aspect of America's maritime history. His emphasis on the experiences and political motivations of the key personalities involved provides useful insights into the decision making process within the Shipping Board at this time. Meticulous research has enabled the author to capture all the fascinating details behind the animosity and controversy that sprang forth as both William Denman, Chairman of the Shipping Board, and George W. Goethals, President of the Emergency Fleet Corporation, tried to gain the upper hand in determining shipbuilding policy. Although Goethals, the man who built the Panama Canal, was hand-picked by Denman to head the shipbuilding effort, the imbroglio after his appointment led to the downfall of both men.

Readers will find that this book provides an excellent discussion of the shipping and merchant shipbuilding industries in the United States between the Civil War and its entry into World War I. The author's scholarly approach is readily apparent in setting the scene for the Denman-Goethals controversy.

While this reviewer found the book of particular interest, its value could have

been greatly improved had the author chosen to continue his discussion of the actions taken by the Shipping Board and the Emergency Fleet Corporation after President Wilson replaced Denman and Goethals in the summer of 1917. It would have provided important information concerning the wartime shipbuilding program and the development of the "fabricated" ship. Because they were delayed by the Denman-Goethals controversy, most of these mass-produced ships were delivered to the government only after the cessation of hostilities. The production of so many ships, no longer needed for war, at the government's expense had important influence on both America's shipping and shipbuilding industries after the war.

Unfortunately, the exorbitant price of the book will probably limit its readership. It is well worth seeking, however, for those who are seriously interested in this subject.

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Breyer, Siegfried. *Soviet Warship Development, Vol. I, 1917-1937*. Rachel Magowan, trans. London: Conway Maritime Press, 1992. 288pp. \$68

The author of this weapons encyclopedia made his mark many years ago as an authority on twentieth-century battleships and battlecruisers. He is, however, also widely regarded as an expert on the former Soviet fleet and has published extensively in German on this subject. This work is an English

translation of the first volume of his critically acclaimed 1989 *Encyklopaedie des sowjetischen Kriegsschiffbau*.

The main text of this work is divided into nine chapters, which are clearly delineated chronologically. The first five provide a complete overview of prerevolutionary Russian warship construction, naval ordnance, and shipyards, and the status of the ships and construction program in the tumultuous days of 1918. The remaining four chapters discuss: the first tentative steps taken by the new Soviet government to mold into a useful fleet the hodgepodge of obsolete and new ships it had inherited; the first two construction plans; and lastly, Soviet naval ordnance in 1937. This material is supplemented by a cogent foreword, a note on methodology, and a chronology of the key events in the history of the Soviet Union and its navy. (It is unfortunate that the latter terminates in mid-1933). The author has thoughtfully provided both a list of abbreviations and an explanation of the transliteration of the Russian alphabet.

Although the narrative portions of this work are brief, Siegfried Breyer still manages to present a wealth of information in his text. Readers will certainly benefit from the overview of Russian naval history offered in the first chapter. The chapters on warship design, construction, and reconstruction offer a blend of detailed technical data and descriptive narrative on the ship-types covered. Depending on the subject and time period, these chapters focus on from three to sixteen different warship types. For the most part they are remarkably informative, and Breyer