Britain’s early twentieth century naval race with Germany has launched as many studies as ships. From Winston Churchill to Paul Kennedy, scholars have used it to explain the outbreak of the First World War or to substantiate their theories of state power. Matthew Seligmann walks bravely into this rich if well-trodden territory with *The Royal Navy and the German Threat, 1901-1914*, a thoroughly researched book that offers a new perspective on the strategic contest between Britain and Germany.

No stranger to Anglo-German military history, Seligmann has written several books in this area, most recently *Naval Intelligence from Germany: The Reports of British Naval Attaches in Berlin, 1906-1914* (2006) and *Spies in Uniform: British Naval and Military Intelligence on the Eve of the First World War* (2006). His extensive archival knowledge is on display in this latest project, which aims to connect the literatures that discuss the outbreak of World War I and those that study the history of espionage in the same period. Indeed, this book’s copious footnotes and bibliographical information will make it a valuable resource to researchers.

Seligmann’s primary objective is to show that the Royal Navy was actively planning to counter a different kind of German naval threat than has previously been emphasized: that of armed merchant vessels capable of disrupting British trade. While this argument is specific in detail, its implications are much broader. By showing that German commerce raiding and armed merchant ships were seen by the Admiralty as a major threat, Seligmann destabilizes an axiom of the Anglo-German rivalry narrative – that it was primarily a contest to see who could build the most capital ships, namely the new *Dreadnought*-class battleships. In this way he also questions the presumed doctrinal ascendancy of capital ship offensive warfare, advocated so forcefully by American Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, at either the British or German admiralties. Finally, Seligmann takes the sinking of the *Lusitania* out of its usual political context as a *casus belli* and places it in the context

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2 Kennedy famously extrapolated on his earlier work to make this theorization, see: Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

of a long-running strategic contest between Britain and Germany over armed commercial ships – one which saw the *Lusitania* fitted with Admiralty-subsidized engines and gun mounts under the Cunard Agreement.

The first two chapters of the book are studies in naval planning and intelligence. Seligmann establishes that Germany, despite the machinations of committed Mahanian Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, planned to attack British maritime commerce in the event of war, and that British naval intelligence was aware of the fact. Chapters 3 and 4 cover the Admiralty's attempted naval solutions for protecting British shipping: the Cunard Agreement for outfitting merchant liners, and the design of a new ‘battle cruiser’ class ship that could intercept German commerce raiding vessels. The next two chapters concern institutional responses to the threat. Chapter 5 details British attempts to bring about a prohibition of armed merchant vessels at successive international naval conferences. These attempts failed, and Britain instead created a network of naval intelligence officers capable of observing the behavior of German merchant ships in foreign ports, which Seligmann details in Chapter 6. The final chapter documents First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill's resolution to outfit ships with fully installed guns and to create provisions for their requisition as ‘Defensively Armed Merchant Ships’ or DAMS (p.132). Seligmann’s epilogue carries the narrative to the outbreak of World War I.

*The Royal Navy and the German Threat* is, like many of Seligmann’s books, primarily a military history. However, the archival detail with which he writes gives the reader a sense of the policymaking process in early twentieth century bureaucracies. Technology features heavily in this book, as the problem Seligmann’s subjects are trying to address is fundamentally technological – how to account for ships with unconventional kit and capabilities. Yet Seligmann does not attempt to draw broader conclusions about the relationship between technology and policymaking from this study, an exercise that might have widened its impact.

Seligmann charts the trajectory of various memos and notes across the desks of numerous officers and bureaucrats, including unsuccessful proposals and quickly discarded policies. These will fatigue some readers, but they serve a higher purpose in showing that the making of military policy was a complicated affair involving many other participants besides the usual “great men” of the period: Tirpitz, Fisher, Churchill. Seligmann does fellow researchers of the Royal Navy a service by explaining gaps and confusions in the archival record. His approach also demonstrates how a researcher might successfully go ‘against the grain’ of the archive to reconstruct the history of an issue with a fragmented record, like the threat of armed commercial ships in war. In sum, this book fully accomplishes its analytical objectives and has created space for itself in the substantial corpus of important work on the naval race that preceded the First World War.