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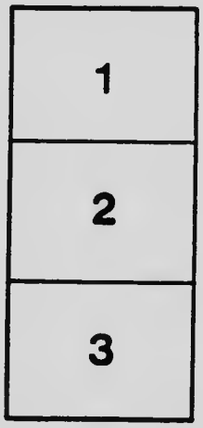

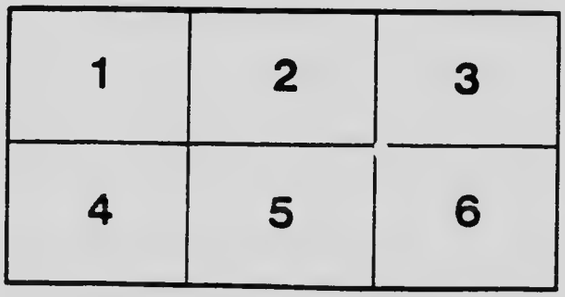

OXFORD PAMPHLETS

1914–1915

SEA POWER AND THE WAR

BY

J. R. THURSFIELD

HON. FELLOW OF JESUS COLLEGE

Price Twopence net

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
HUMPHREY MILFORD
LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW
NEW YORK TORONTO MELBOURNE BOMBAY

THIS pamphlet was originally written as an article for translation into Russian and publication in the Russian Press. It has since been revised and enlarged by the author, at the instance of the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, for publication in pamphlet form.

H. W. C. D.

SEA POWER AND THE WAR

It appears that a feeling is abroad among our gallant Allies, especially the more distant of them, such as Russia, that this country is not taking the war as seriously as it ought, nor taking its due share in it. I can well understand this feeling, though I cannot for a moment share it. But since it exists and is said to be growing, and even to be spreading among friendly neutrals, such as the United States, I think it behoves all good citizens in this country to do what they can to counteract and, if it may be, to dispel it. It seems to me to rest mainly on two fundamental misconceptions, one a misreading of the national psychology, the other a misunderstanding, which is, in truth, all too common even amongst ourselves, of the true function that belongs specially to the United Kingdom in any great conflict of arms in which its action is associated with that of Allies on the Continent. Of the first of these misconceptions I will only say a few words before I pass on to the second and far more serious one.

All nations misunderstand each other more or less; that is, no nation ever fully grasps the more intimate psychological characteristics of any other. Further, the depth of the misunderstanding is, other things being equal, generally proportionate to the distance which separates them geographically. We are often told by Englishmen who know Russia well that our popular conception of Russia and the characteristics of its people is full of misunderstandings. Such mis-

understandings are only too likely to be reciprocal, and in any case they are certain to be mischievous. Even in the present war, though I am sure that all Englishmen dimly appreciate the tremendous, I might well say, the superhuman efforts that the Russian Armies are making to vanquish the common foe, yet I am equally sure that few of us can follow the campaign on the Eastern front of conflict with the same sympathetic insight and the same strategic grasp as that on the Western front in Flanders and in France, where our own troops are engaged in concert with those of Belgium and France, and where the incessant thunder of artillery in action can almost be heard from our shores. This is mainly the effect of distance; and it means that Englishmen and Russians are looking at the war in a different perspective and from widely separated points of view. But there is another and far deeper source of misunderstanding. Foreign nations find England in particular a nation which is very hard to know and understand. We are isolated by the sea, and it is often said that Englishmen, by reason of this isolation, are 'bad Europeans'. This really means that we have none of that cosmopolitan freemasonry which, superficial as it is, does nevertheless make, so far as it goes, for the better understanding of one continental nation by another, and, to tell the truth, we are by no means keen to cultivate it. We go our own way and reck little of what other nations think of us. We are intensely critical of ourselves, and often depreciatory of our better selves. Collectively we are endowed with a fine sense of humour, but individually with a plentiful lack of imagination. The sense of humour impels us to self-criticism, while the lack of imagination robs us of the gift of seeing ourselves as

others see us. It may be, as Froissart said of us long ago, that we take our pleasures *moult tristement*, and, no doubt, we do for the most part lack the spontaneous and expansive gaiety of our French Allies; but when it comes to enterprises of great pith and moment we set about them, not indeed with a light heart, nor yet with a solemn countenance, but with a certain levity of demeanour, and with a cheery confidence, begotten of our history, that whatever our mistakes and shortcomings may be at the beginning we shall win through in the end.

Such being our national characteristics, as known to ourselves, it is easy to understand how our Allies and other friends who do not know them so well, may be led to believe that we are not taking the war seriously enough. Yet I can hardly see how we could take it more seriously in all essential respects. At any rate it is manifest that responsible public men among our Allies do not share the illusion of which I am speaking. M. Sazonoff, the Russian Premier, has lately declared in the Duma that 'Great Britain was undertaking a far greater burden than had been expected of her'; and M. Millerand, the French Minister of War, has, on returning from a visit to England, told his countrymen that he is 'simply astounded' at the results attained by the efforts we have made and are still making. It was well known to our Allies that, if we were to take part in a continental campaign, the numerical force we could send to the front at the outset would be almost insignificant in comparison with the vast armies that they could put in the field. But we sent it there without a moment's delay, and we have maintained it there in undiminished force in spite of appalling losses, which, though they have caused personal griefs unnumbered and untold,

have not weakened the national fibre in the least. It was, of course, a little army, but it was very soon to show that it was by no means the 'contemptible little army' that the Kaiser is said to have called it. Moreover, we took immediate steps to make that little army into a big army. Lord Kitchener has called for a million of men and another million to follow in due course, and as fast as they can be trained. Has any nation ever made a bigger effort or taken its task more seriously? Lord Kitchener, at any rate, has avowed his content with the progress that is being made. We shall get those two millions, and more if we need them. No one has been in the past more bitterly opposed to compulsory service than I have, but, had it been necessary in the present emergency, I would have voted for it with both hands sooner than see the Allies fail in the enterprise they have undertaken, and I am sure all my countrymen would do the same. Moreover, we have surrendered all our historic liberties into the keeping of the Government without even a murmur at the sacrifice, and we have provided lavishly for the cost of the war, and shall go on providing for it however long the war lasts. We know that the Allies will win in the end, and that is why we are not only confident but cheerful.

We are even cheerful, although to the disgust of all that is sound and patriotic amongst us, too many of our professional footballers, putting their pelf before their patriotism, are still deaf to the call of their country's need. But let us not exaggerate that ugly blemish on our national demeanour. It is really a very small speck, although we have, not very wisely, made it look large in the eyes of our Allies and friends by showing it to them through the magnifying glass with which we are prone

to regard our national shortcomings. The few thousands of professional footballers who will not enlist—albeit trained athletes and men of exceptional physique, and therefore very acceptable as recruits—would be but a drop in the ocean of Lord Kitchener's two millions. Even of the much larger numbers—perhaps twenty-fold as many or more—who go weekly to see these 'muddied oafs at the goal', no one can say how many are men employed in industries necessary to the efficient conduct of the war, how many more are enlisted recruits not yet supplied with uniform, how many are already over age or otherwise debarred from military service, nor yet how great or how small is the residue which consists of wastrels, weaklings, loafers, and idlers, whom no recruiting sergeant would look at. Still the blemish exists, and I am only concerned to reduce it to its proper proportions. It has probably done more than anything else to encourage the feeling I am combating. The fact that these professional footballers are being roundly trounced and denounced from one end of the country to the other is at once a proof of the nation's earnestness and resolve, and, being misunderstood abroad, one of the chief sources of the misconception that prevails.

I now pass to the second misconception of which I have spoken. It is, in truth, very much the more deep-seated and far-reaching of the two. It rests mainly on a failure—far too common even in this country and still more common in other countries—to appreciate in its true significance the indisputable fact that the sea power of England is the one paramount factor which has secured for the Allies all the advantages they have so far gained in the field, and will, by the blessing of Providence and the skill of many a good

admiral, assuredly give them the victory in the end. Even in its financial aspect, the maintenance of her sea power is no small contribution for England to have made to the common cause. Our Navy Estimates for the current year—framed long before there was any immediate prospect of war—amounted roundly to some £51,500,000 sterling. As the population of these islands is roundly about 45,500,000, this works out at a cost of about 22*s*. per head of the population. This is a heavier burden per head of population than any great nation in the world bears for the cost of its army in time of peace.[1] If then the financial balance be struck on the basis of these data, England's share in the burden of the war will assuredly not be found to kick the beam.

But I do not rely on the financial argument. I merely use it as an illustration. Let us see what the sea power of England is doing for the common cause. In considering this question I shall have in some measure to deal with the military situation, though it lies for the most part outside my special province of discussion. At first sight, when the small number of the British forces abroad is compared with the vast armies which our two principal Allies have put into the field and are now maintaining and constantly reinforcing there, it might well be thought that England is not taking her due share of the war. But that is not the proper way

[1] I take the following figures from *Whitaker's Almanack* for 1915:

	Military Budget, 1913–14.	*Population.*
	£	
Austria-Hungary	22,193,000	49,654,000
France	36,550,000	39,601,000
Germany	60,000,000	64,925,000
Russia	67,200,000	173,359,000

of looking at the matter. Neither the French nor the Russian Armies have had to cross the sea in order to come face to face with the common foe. The British Army has, and that makes all the difference. It introduces the factor of sea power into the strategic problem which confronts the Allies; and, rightly appreciated, this factor will be found to dominate the whole situation. I may, no doubt, assume that the actions and re-actions of the two great armies of the Allies one upon the other have been continuous, mutual, and reciprocal from first to last. We know that the original plan of the enemy was to crush France first and as soon as might be, and then to turn upon and rend Russia before she could gather her hosts together. Herr von Jagow, the German Foreign Secretary, frankly avowed that rapidity of action was Germany's great asset, while inexhaustible numbers were that of Russia. Germany set herself to use time in order to defeat numbers. That object was never attained, and never can be attained. It was frustrated once for all when the German retreat first began in France. That retreat was in large measure caused by the advance of Russia into East Prussia, which, although it cost Russia dear in the end, nevertheless achieved its strategic purpose by compelling Germany to withdraw troops from the western front, and thereby relieve pressure on that front which had become wellnigh irresistible. But the German retreat had been preceded by a retreat of the entire line of the Allies in the West, and that retreat might have become a rout but for the presence of 'French's contemptible little army'. Whether it was contemptible or not the Kaiser knows by this time; but our Allies at any rate will both acknowledge that it saved the whole situation alike in the West and in

the East. I do not, of course, mean that the British Army did this alone. The operations of all the Allied forces both in the West and in the East were a combined strategic effort, in which all the Allies and every unit of their respective forces engaged nobly bore their share. But I do mean, and the proposition is incontestable, that the absence of the British Army from the conflict—or of any equivalent portion of the Allied forces in either field—might, and probably would, have wrought irretrievable disaster to the common cause. It was touch and go, as it was. The 'contemptible little army' could not possibly have been spared.

But how came the British Army to be there and to do what it did? That is the question we must ask ourselves if we would estimate aright the share that England is taking in the war. It is not the relative strength of the British Army that counts, but the decisive part that British forces, naval and military, have played in the larger strategy of the campaign. Our army had to cross the sea at the outset. That it could never have done, still less could it have been sustained in the field by a constant stream of reinforcements and supplies—so that it is now far stronger, better equipped, and better supplied than it was when it first left these shores—if its communications oversea had not been maintained inviolate and inviolable by the supremacy of the British Fleet. In other words the British Fleet is the very keystone of the great arch of combined strategy which spans the whole field of conflict from East to West. The two great buttresses of the Russian Armies in the East and the Allies' Armies in the West reciprocally support each other, but both would crumble to pieces if the keystone were removed. It matters not that no great naval battle has been

fought. It matters not that we have suffered reverses at sea here and there—grievous in the loss of gallant lives, but insignificant in all other respects. The worst of them has now been nobly retrieved by Sir Doveton Sturdee's brilliant feat of naval arms off the Falkland Islands. This was a signal manifestation of sea power, a triumph alike of strategy, of tactics, and of gun-fire. The Germans have alleged that thirty-eight British ships, some of them battleships, were engaged in the operation. They might have doubled the number and still taken credit for the moderation of the estimate; for Mr. Churchill told us some time ago that over seventy warships of the Allies were engaged in searching the Atlantic for their enemies. They might, indeed, have multiplied the number tenfold, and still have been not very wide of the mark. For the sea is all one, and the Allies' command of it is continuous and unchallenged, being exercised in concert by all the fleets, and all the squadrons, and all the flotillas afloat in all parts of the world. How many ships sufficed to dispose of Admiral von Spee's squadron in actual conflict is really a matter of very little consequence. We took care, of course, to concentrate a sufficient force for the purpose; and the force which sound strategy combined with our unchallenged supremacy at sea enabled us to concentrate did suffice to dispose of its immediate adversaries, which was all that was required for the moment. Had more force been needed, more force would have been employed. The same lesson is taught by the disgraceful raid of the German battle-cruiser squadron on the Hartlepools, Scarborough, and Whitby—an act of pure piracy whereby no military object of any moment was or could have been attained, even if any such was so much as sought, while harm-

less civilians, feeble old men and women, and even helpless children were indiscriminately maimed and slaughtered. It succeeded once, if so murderous a deed can be reckoned a success by any self-respecting nation; but even so these chivalrous raiders only escaped by the skin of their teeth as they scuttled off into the mist just as the avenger was at hand. Nevertheless,

Raro antecedentem scelestum
Deseruit pede Poena claudo.

The German Admiralty have learnt by this time that fugitive raids across a sea of which the enemy is in effective command are very costly as well as very hazardous enterprises. The second attempt of the most powerful cruiser squadron they could send to sea to repeat the murderous onslaught on our coasts proved as disastrous as the first was dastardly. The piratical cruisers never saw the British coasts they set out to harry. One of them was sunk, and two others received a punishment which only the timely protection of their submarines and mine-fields prevented from being as summary and as condign as that of the *Blücher*. We know now exactly what to think of Herr Ballin's preposterous boast that the British Fleet is 'in hiding', and that its command of the sea is an illusion. The illusion is not on our side, as Herr Ballin and his countrymen must now ruefully acknowledge; and if the 'hiding' is not henceforth on theirs, the gallant exploits of Sir Doveton Sturdee in the South Atlantic and of Sir David Beatty in the North Sea must surely presage for us what the inevitable result must be. Indeed, if the quotation be not too flippant, I might sum up the whole situation in the words of the immortal Mr. Samuel Weller, 'Give my compliments

to the Justice, and tell him I've spiled his beadle, and that if he'll swear in a new 'un, I'll come back again to-morrow and spile him.' Germany has very few new beadles to swear in, England has plenty of Wellers to 'spile' such as are left to her, and plenty more to follow, even if some few are 'spiled' in their turn. The British Fleet is not in hiding and never has been, and England's supremacy at sea is now more firmly established than ever. So long as it remains unchallenged —perhaps even more if it should be challenged—it dominates and will dominate the whole situation both at sea and on land. Let it not be supposed that our Allies have no concern in it. They have every concern in it. I repeat that more than any other single factor it guarantees their ultimate success. More than any other single factor it has secured for them all the advantages they have so far gained.

For it is not merely in securing the safe transport, reinforcement, and supply of the British Army on the Continent that the British Navy has fought so effectively —and yet in large measure without fighting at all—the battle of all the Allies. The security of our Army in transit and in the field, as well as that of unending reinforcements from the Dominions traversing the seas for thousands of miles unmolested, is to a great extent merely a by-product, so to speak, of the supremacy of our Navy ubiquitous and unchallenged the seas. German maritime commerce is suppressed. Whatever supplies necessary for the further conduct of the war Germany may need, she will not get them in any volume from across the seas. The financial sinews of war which she might have obtained from the freedom of her maritime commerce will all be denied to her so long as England—not indeed without valuable and valued assis-

tance from her naval Allies—continues to exclude her mercantile flag from the seas. The words 'economic pressure' sound tame, cold, and insipid by the side of those glowing phrases in which we present the tragedies and the triumphs of the stricken field. The thing they stand for has none of that dramatic intensity, none of that poignant and uplifting emotion which belongs to the battle, the siege, or the assault. Yet it is this same economic pressure, dull, purposeless, and inglorious as it seems, silent, unceasing, irresistible as it really is, sustained only by almost superhuman endurance on the part of those who exert it, never relaxing their vigilance for a single moment by day or night, waiting always, and waiting so far in vain, for that decisive conflict with the foe which is the goal of all their hopes—it is this which more than anything else should prove to the Allies that their victory is certain in the end.

For in truth a Navy secure or at least unchallenged in its supremacy may seem to be doing nothing and yet in reality be doing everything. It may fight no battles and yet win the final victory for those who fight them on land. Yet with or without great battles supreme sea power is justified of all its endeavours, and the more supreme it is the fewer battles it will have to fight. 'The battles of naval warfare', said Admiral Mahan, whose loss we all deplore, 'are few compared with those on land; it is the unremitting daily silent pressure of naval force, when it has attained command of the sea against an opponent—the continuous blocking of communication—which has made sea power so decisive an element in the history of the world.' For ten years after Trafalgar was won in 1805 until the end of the war in 1815 no great battle was fought on the seas. Yet in those ten years Napoleon was overthrown. He

was overthrown on land, it is true, but it was the power of the sea that enabled the Allies to overthrow him—the unremitting daily silent pressure of naval force, the continuous blocking of communication, which strangled the power of Napoleon and starved his armies into submission. That power was exerted by England, and yet her fleets might have been thought to be 'doing nothing' because they fought no battles. Thus did England by her sea power save her Allies in Europe from the dominion of Napoleon. Thus will England by her sea power save her Allies in Europe from the dominion of Germany.

There is, however, another effect of supreme sea power which may lend some countenance to the feeling that England is taking less than her due share in the war. Sea power supreme and unchallenged secures England from invasion and thus renders her immune from the worst horrors of war. It is true that our north-eastern coast has had a foretaste of what German 'frightfulness' might be if ever our Fleet was overthrown, and that an air-craft raid in Norfolk has attested German barbarism without terrifying those affected by it. But Belgium has been desolated. French and Russian territory have both been invaded and laid waste. Serbia is sorely stricken. England alone is immune as regards her native soil. We must make due allowance for this as regards the feeling of our Allies, and be unspeakably thankful for it ourselves. But the Allies would profit nothing by the invasion of England. On the contrary, they would lose everything, because the overthrow of England's supremacy at sea would assuredly mean the final victory of Germany. Moreover, the Allies gain greatly by England's immunity at home. War demands the strenuous and unceasing activity of all industries which

are concerned with the production of all kinds of warlike material and equipment. So long as our industries are unimpeded we can supply ourselves with what we need and help to supply our Allies, and this in fact is what we do and shall continue doing so long as the seas are open. I have heard of millions of boots being ordered in England for France, and a writer in *Le Temps* has stated that 'England has manufactured all the necessary material, while her factories have furnished military supplies which France and Russia, paralysed by mobilization, were unable to provide'. The unarrested industries of England are in fact indispensable, in innumerable ways, to the adequate equipment and supply of the Allied Armies fighting on the Continent, and will certainly become still more indispensable as the war goes on and the Allies invade Germany in their turn. For by that time, if not before, England herself will have no 'contemptible little army' in the field, but a very big army and an army splendidly equipped. What the sea power of England has done so far, great as it is, paramount as it ought to be regarded among the advantages achieved by the Allies in common, is as nothing to what it will do in the long run when the desolating economic pressure unceasingly applied to Germany sustains and redoubles the military pressure applied by the Allied Armies constantly refreshed, reinforced, and re-equipped from the inexhaustible resources secured by an open sea. For be it remembered that England never puts forth her full strength in the opening stages of a war. It might be well if she could, but she cannot. She is not yet beginning to fight as she will fight when her resources are fully developed and deployed. In the famous fight between Paul Jones in the *Bonhomme Richard* and Pearson in the *Serapis*, the latter, when he

thought he had battered his adversary to pieces, called out to ask Paul Jones if he had struck his flag. 'I have not yet begun to fight,' was the reply, and Paul Jones fought on with what result we know. His own ship went to the bottom, but he remained in possession of the *Serapis*. Paul Jones was our enemy at the time, but he was a true Briton born, and his spirit was that of a Briton. I commend the story to all who think that England is not in earnest in this war.

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