

THE TRANSFORMATION OF  
BRITISH NAVAL STRATEGY



*The Transformation of  
British Naval Strategy*

SEAPOWER AND SUPPLY  
IN NORTHERN EUROPE, 1808–1812

James Davey

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James Davey, Greenwich, 2012



## ABBREVIATIONS

ADM	Admiralty
Commission on Fees	Reports of the Commissioners appointed by an Act 25 Geo. III cap. 19 to enquire into the Fees, Gratuities, Perquisites, and Emoluments which are or have been lately received into the several Public Offices . . . 1786–8
Commission of Naval Revision	Reports of the Commissioners appointed for Revising and Digesting the Civil Affairs of the Navy, 13 reports, 1806 to 1809
MA	Mulgrave Archive
MID	Papers of Charles Middleton (in NMM)
<i>MM</i>	<i>Mariner's Mirror</i>
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Caird Library
SRO	Suffolk Record Office
TNA	National Archives, Kew, UK
VB	Victualling Board
WO	War Office records

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## Introduction

VICTORY AT THE BATTLE OF TRAFALGAR in 1805 secured an unprecedented mastery of the seas for Britain but did little to halt the continental hegemony of Napoleon. Under his leadership, the French empire continued to expand, ultimately stretching from Spain to the Danube. By 1808, virtually all of mainland Europe was in a state of enforced hostility to Britain. Political antagonism became economic hostility, as Napoleon set up the Continental System, a continental blockade aimed at removing British economic power from Europe. Unable to defeat Britain at sea, he resorted to economic warfare. The Berlin Decree of 1806 and the Milan Decrees of 1807 prohibited all trade with Britain, banned all British goods and declared that any captured would be 'fair prize' and confiscated.<sup>1</sup> If not a new direction in the war, it represented a change in emphasis. Napoleon envisaged Britain's defeat not as an invasion and a march on London, but in bringing it to its knees by crippling it economically and thus financially. The British responded with a series of Orders in Council, which declared all ports under French control to be under blockade, meaning they could only trade with Britain's acquiescence. The ten years that followed Nelson's greatest victory saw the Royal Navy's role become more subtle, though no less important. Dominant at sea after 1805, it had no need, and little opportunity, to fight decisive battles. Instead, it concentrated on using its naval supremacy to bring the war to a conclusion. Seapower, as ever the nation's major offensive and defensive force, continued to be the keystone of British strategy.

The reality of the Continental System saw a major redeployment of the British fleet away from the old primacy of the Western Squadron in the Bay of Biscay to the North and Baltic Seas and to Portugal and the Mediterranean in the south. Napoleon was in the strongest position to damage Britain's continental trade in northern Europe. This region constituted the most important trading centre for Britain in the eighteenth century, supplying a major source of revenue for British exports to the region, particularly luxury and colonial goods, re-exported to Europe. French

<sup>1</sup> Lance E. Davis and Stanley L. Engerman, *Naval Blockades in Peace and War: An Economic History since 1750* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 29.

expansion eastwards across Europe threatened this trade altogether. In 1795 the Southern Netherlands, now Belgium, was annexed to France. From 1806, Holland was set up by Napoleon Bonaparte as a puppet kingdom governed by his brother Louis Bonaparte, becoming part of the French empire in 1810. British trade to the northern nations concentrated ever eastwards into the Baltic Sea. This was a long-standing trade, not only as a market for British exports, but also as the source of crucial resources. One was particularly important: the vast majority of naval stores needed to construct and maintain the British mercantile and naval marine came from the Baltic region.

The Baltic Sea, surrounded by the nations of Prussia, Sweden, Denmark and Russia, was an arena in which the most fundamental British interests could be fought for. Between the years 1808 and 1812, a naval fleet under the command of Sir Admiral James Saumarez sailed into the Baltic Sea to protect British trade, organise convoys, while offering the merchants of those nations under Napoleon's orbit the opportunity to continue trading, albeit illicitly, and in the process undermine Napoleon's Continental System. The British Orders in Council deprived Russia of her maritime trade, a major source of her wealth. The presence of a British fleet in the Baltic played an instrumental role in levering Russia away from its French alliance. It was also charged with blockading the Russian fleet in port: after Trafalgar, the Russian fleet was the largest threat to Britain's naval supremacy.

Despite the primacy of the Baltic Sea in British strategic calculations, it is important to consider the seas of northern Europe as one interconnected space. On leaving the Baltic Sea merchant convoys crossed the North Sea, where Dutch and French privateers also threatened.<sup>2</sup> A smaller fleet was stationed in the North Sea to protect merchant shipping. The fleet in the North Sea performed another critical role: containing the new fleet that Napoleon was building at Antwerp. After the crushing defeat at Trafalgar, Napoleon continued to build warships in great numbers: by 1813 the French fleet had been rebuilt, consisting of over eighty ships, with another thirty-five under construction.<sup>3</sup> Much of this building was done at Antwerp, taking advantage of its relative proximity to Baltic shipbuilding materials. While the fleet in the Baltic blockaded the Russian fleet, its counterpart in the North Sea contained the squadron being built by the French, gathering intelligence as to its progress, and, on one occasion in

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Crowhurst, *The French War on Trade: Privateering 1793–1815* (Aldershot, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Roger Morriss, *The Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy: Resources, Logistics and the State, 1755–1815* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 53.

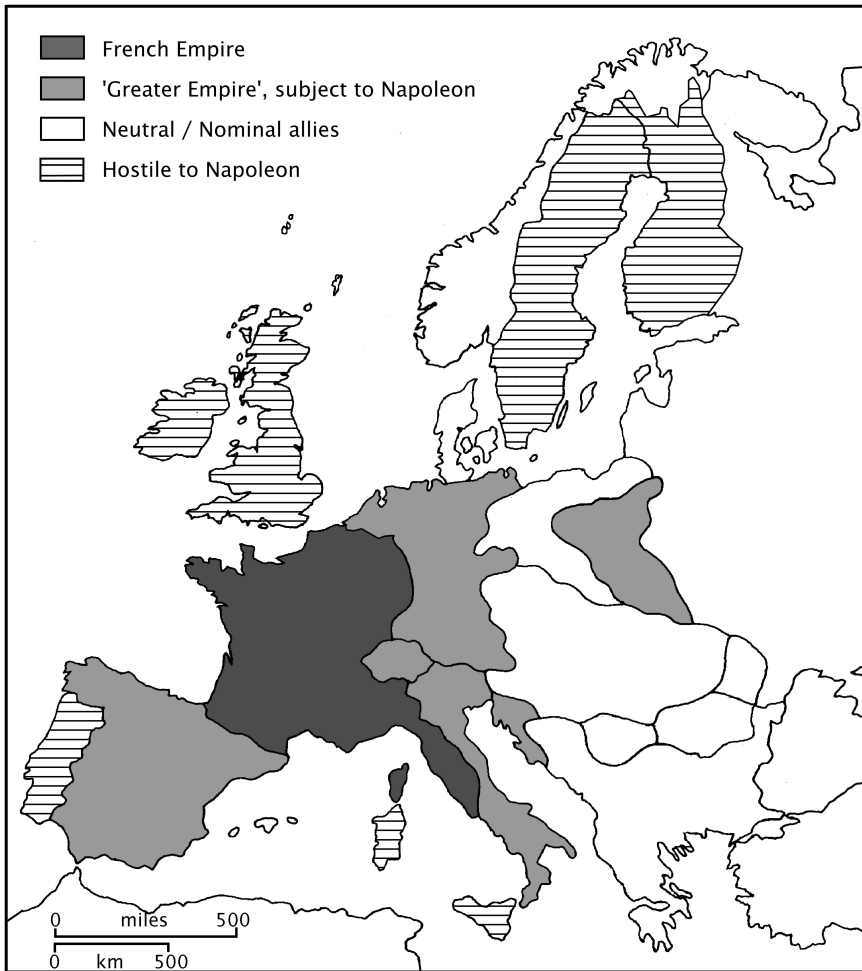


Figure 1. Europe in 1808

1809, launching a raid to destroy French shipbuilding efforts. Both fleets prompted government concern in Britain; had either fleet escaped, it had the potential to interrupt the flow of trade to and from the Baltic. At the same time, the fleet in the Baltic could cut off the supply of naval stores into France and Antwerp, obstructing French shipbuilding plans less directly. The Baltic was the first line in a defensive war protecting British economic and financial interests; at the same time it was at the forefront of an aggressive war against the Continental System, French shipbuilding efforts and the Russian economy. This book is chiefly concerned with the fleet in the Baltic, though this will be presented in the context of a much broader strategic picture.

Given the importance of these two seas to British interests, it is remarkable that they have been for the most part ignored by historians. In 2004, Jan Glete complained that 'it is unfortunate that there are few modern studies of naval warfare and the political roles of sea power in the Baltic'.<sup>4</sup> The North Sea can be more easily explained, with its smaller force and remit. The Baltic fleet however was the second largest fleet in existence from 1807, until Russia's change of allegiance in 1812. Various historians have downplayed the theatre in calculations of French defeat. Rory Muir comments that 'the war shifted away from the Baltic' after 1808, ignoring five years of conflict and economic warfare.<sup>5</sup> Paul Kennedy in his work on the Royal Navy referred to the Baltic as a 'peripheral' operation.<sup>6</sup> Economic historians have also downplayed the region's commercial worth. M. S. Anderson commented that 'the interruption of trade with Russia' was 'a nuisance rather than a disaster'.<sup>7</sup> D. Kirby and M.-L. Hinkkanen argued in 2000 that attempts to deny British access to the Baltic were crushed by 1807.<sup>8</sup> These scholars fail to account for the significant investment in ships and men made by the Admiralty in the Baltic between 1808 and 1812. Syntheses of naval history and Napoleonic Wars have concentrated on the Atlantic hemisphere; as Glete has noted, 'why there were considerable regional navies in the Baltic and Levant is not discussed and sometimes hardly mentioned'.<sup>9</sup>

Our knowledge of British involvement in the Baltic theatre is largely confined to the work of two men.<sup>10</sup> The first, A. N. Ryan, wrote exten-

<sup>4</sup> Jan Glete, 'Navies and Power Struggle in Northern and Eastern Europe, 1721–1814', in Rob Hobson and Tom Kristansen, eds., *Navies in Northern Waters 1721–2000* (London, 2004), pp. 66–7.

<sup>5</sup> Rory Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon* (Yale, 1996), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Macmillan, 1976), p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> M. S. Anderson, 'The Continental System and Russo-British Relations during the Napoleonic Wars', in K. Bourne and D. C. Watt, eds., *Studies in International History: Essays Presented to W. Norton Medlicott, Stevenson Professor of International History in the University of London* (London, 1967), pp. 68–80, at p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> David Kirby and Merja-Liisa Hinkkanen, *The Baltic and the North Seas* (London, 2000), p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> Glete, 'Navies and Power Struggle', p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> There is a growing literature that covers the Danish and Swedish navies: see Ole Felbaek, 'The Anglo-Danish Wars 1801 and 1807–1814', *Revue internationale d'histoire militaire* (Commission internationale d'histoire militaire) 84 (2004), 100–15; Ole Felbaek, *Denmark and the Armed Neutrality 1800–1: Small-Power Policy in a World War* (Copenhagen, 1980); Jan Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies and State Building in Europe and America, 1500–1860*, 2 vols. (Stockholm, 1993); Jan Glete, *Swedish Naval Administration, 1521–1721: Resource Flows and Organisational Capabilities* (Leiden, 2010); Glete, 'Navies and Power Struggle'.

sively on Saumarez and his work in the Baltic in defending British trade.<sup>11</sup> The admiral was a canny and skilful commander, both operationally and diplomatically. Recently, this has been updated and taken further by Tim Voelcker, whose work displays the extraordinary lengths Saumarez went to ensure diplomatic harmony with Sweden and the safe passage of British trade to and from the Baltic.<sup>12</sup> The two Copenhagen expeditions, in 1801 and 1807 have received historical scrutiny, but are limited to these specific individual events.<sup>13</sup> References to the five years of Baltic operations between 1808 and 1812 are limited to the work of Ryan and Voelcker on Saumarez and small passages in much broader works.<sup>14</sup> An opportunity exists to build on this historical scholarship.

This book considers the navy and the variety of roles and functions it performed in the waters of northern Europe during the Napoleonic War. It is concerned with British strategy, naval policy and operations but locates this in wider economic and political contexts. It seeks to move the focus away from Saumarez himself and places him as one actor in a broader effort. Naval power rested not only on the commanders and personnel at sea but on a wide range of political and administrative factors. For the fleet sent to the Baltic in 1808, one factor was more important than any other: supply. A ship's time at sea depended on their supplies of food and water. At the height of the Napoleonic War, the navy employed over 140,000 men on its ships, all of whom required the daily ration of a pound of bread, a gallon of beer (or equivalent), a pound of meat on six out of seven days, and supplies of oatmeal, pease, butter and cheese. When multiplied by the many thousands of seamen, supplying these men with food was an immense effort, on a massive, industrial scale.

The widening of operational roles throughout the eighteenth century, to allow ships to spend years on active service without returning to port, often in hostile waters, required increasingly sophisticated logistical systems.

<sup>11</sup> A. N. Ryan, 'The Defence of British Trade with the Baltic, 1807–1813', *English Historical Review* 74 (1959), 443–66; A. N. Ryan, 'An Ambassador Afloat: Vice-Admiral Saumarez and the Swedish Court, 1808–1812', in J. Black and P. Woodfine, *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester, 1988); A. N. Ryan, *The Saumarez Papers*, Navy Records Society 110 (London, 1968).

<sup>12</sup> Tim Voelcker, *Saumarez vs Napoleon: The Baltic 1807–1812* (Woodbridge, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Ole Feldbaek, *The Battle of Copenhagen 1801: Nelson and the Danes* (Barnsley, 2002); Thomas Munch-Petersen, *Defying Napoleon: How Britain Bombarded Copenhagen and Seized the Danish Fleet* (Stroud, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> See for example N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London, 2005), pp. 557–61; Peter Padfield, *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the Modern World 1788–1851* (London, 1999).

A fleet's time at sea depended directly on its supplies. As the navy grew in size and was asked to fulfil increasingly challenging strategies, both government and bureaucrats were confronted with many obstacles as they strove to ensure fleets could be supplied at distance from home waters for extended periods. During the eighteenth century, there was a continual process of reform to procedures and systems that enabled the broadening of operational possibilities. It may be said, then, that the eighteenth century witnessed a transformation of naval strategy, with advances in logistical effectiveness firmly at the helm. Strategy, in this sense, means the use of military or naval force in the pursuance of political goals. As a term, strategy did not exist in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>15</sup> There is no doubt though that the Admiralty, in conjunction with its subordinate boards, considered how naval force would be used to achieve political goals: they did not use the word, but they would have understood its meaning.

The range of strategic possibilities open to policy-makers drastically changed in the second half of the eighteenth century, owing in great part to logistical advances. Whereas in the 1740s a ship's time at sea was directly linked to the amount of food it carried, and no more, by the end of the Napoleonic War a ship could be consistently supplied the year round regardless of its location in the world with logistical structures created and maintained to allow this. This is not to suggest a Whiggish development from chaos through to logistical perfection; on the contrary, developments in naval logistics were met by repeated obstacles and failures. Indeed, the problems posed by the Continental System in 1807, requiring year-long service in hostile regions, provided fresh challenges. Naval administration acted as a constant lever, improving the operational capabilities of the navy, allowing a more and more ambitious strategy to be pursued. This was not an overnight revolution, but a slow transformation. This book considers the last stage of this evolution, in the years following 1807, when logistical advances refined the potential of seapower. In this, it aligns with broader historiographies that have fundamentally changed the way both naval and military history have been studied. Narrow, battle-centric accounts of generals and commanders have been superseded by cross-disciplinary studies that consider the wide range of factors that contributed to naval power. War and military and naval institutions cannot be studied in isolation and must take account of their economic, social and political

<sup>15</sup> N. A. M. Rodger, 'The Idea of Naval Strategy in Britain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in Geoffrey Till, ed., *The Development of British Naval Thinking: Essays in Memory of Bryan Ranft* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 19–20.



surroundings.<sup>16</sup> Much scholarship, in particular the work of John Brewer and Patrick O'Brien, has attributed Britain's success in the wars against eighteenth-century France to its greater ability to harness the resources of the nation, in particular finance.<sup>17</sup> In early modern Europe, states survived if they possessed sufficient and continuous command over the financial means necessary to defend their territories and citizens against external aggression. To become more powerful required ever increasing amounts of revenue.<sup>18</sup> Certain Western states, Britain in particular, developed a sophisticated system of banking and credit in order to pay for longer and more expensive wars.<sup>19</sup> It is clear that Britain had a huge advantage in the field of finance: such opinions form a rich consensus among historians writing in the late twentieth and twenty-first century. The preoccupation with finance as the mainspring of state power has given rise to studies of financial management in other eighteenth century states, which has shown Britain's methods of raising money to be less exceptional than previously thought. It remains the case though that the scale of British financial capabilities was unmatched.<sup>20</sup> Raising money was one thing, how it was used another: the spending of the British state has been overlooked. How effectively were its resources used?

In particular, and most relevant to this book, the success of the Royal Navy during the Napoleonic wars is increasingly seen to depend on government and administration as much as the fighting capabilities of its fleets or armies.<sup>21</sup> No longer can naval history be studied solely in the form of battles and operations; no longer can it be studied in isolation from its administrative, economic and political moorings. As important as battles

<sup>16</sup> Daniel A. Baugh, *Naval Administration 1715–1750*, Navy Records Society 120 (London, 1977), p. xii; Gerald S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy: Studies in British Maritime Ascendancy* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, 1989); Patrick Karl O'Brien, *Power with Profit: The State and the Economy 1688–1815* (London, 1991); Patrick O'Brien, 'The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660–1815', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser, 41/1 (1988), 1–32.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick K. O'Brien and Philip A. Hunt, 'England, 1485–1815', in Richard Bonney, ed., *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe c.1200–1815* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 53–100, p. 53.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York, 1987), p. 76; T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars* (London, 1996), p. 212. See also Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, p. 571.

<sup>20</sup> P. K. O'Brien, 'Fiscal Exceptionalism: Great Britain and its European Rivals from Civil War to Triumph at Trafalgar and Waterloo', in D. Winch and P. K. O'Brien, eds., *The Political Economy of British Historical Experience 1688–1914* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 245–65. Morriss, *Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> See foreword to Stephen F. Gradish, *The Manning of the British Navy during the Seven Years War* (London, 1980), p. xii.

such as Trafalgar were, there is an increased awareness that administrative efforts in finance and logistics were crucial to Britain's ultimate success.<sup>22</sup> The administrative and technological capacities of the Royal Navy have been examined in studies of shipbuilding, the royal dockyards, the ordnance and gun production, manning levels, overseas yards and the transport service.<sup>23</sup> N. A. M. Rodger's *The Command of the Ocean* is separated into chapters in which 'administration' is placed on an equal footing with 'operations'.<sup>24</sup> There is a consensus now that the first half of the eighteenth century 'marked the epoch in which the navy's institutional arrangements, under the auspices of practical experience, matured'.<sup>25</sup>

Within this historiography the victualling of the navy has received increasing attention. This has focused on the structure of the Victualling Board, the body charged with managing the navy's food supplies, its efficiency and its relationship with the wider British economy.<sup>26</sup> This book focuses on the other side of the coin: it assesses the distribution of foodstuffs and its operational and strategic consequences. During the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, despite corn shortages, price rises and contractor bankruptcies, the Victualling Board always had adequate stocks of food in its yards.<sup>27</sup> However, failures in the movement of supplies from Britain to fleets on foreign stations did have crippling effects on the movement of victuals out to fleets. Shortages of transports, delays in loading

<sup>22</sup> Daniel A. Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (New York, 1965). Baugh, *Naval Administration 1715–1750*. Gradish, *The Manning of the British Navy*, p. 209.

<sup>23</sup> For example see Morriss, *Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy*; Morriss, *The Royal Dockyards during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Leicester, 1983); Roger Knight, 'The Royal Dockyards in England at the Time of the American War of Independence' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1972); Glete, *Navies and Nations*, vol. 1, pp. 271–94; Gareth Cole, 'The Ordnance Board and the Royal Navy 1790–1815' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Exeter, 2008); Mary Ellen Condon, 'The Administration of the Transport Service during the War against Revolutionary France, 1793–1802' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1968); David Syrett, *Shipping and the American War, 1775–83: A Study of British Transport Organization* (London, 1970). See also the posthumous book by David Syrett, *Shipping and Military Power in the Seven Years War: The Sails of Victory* (Exeter, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel A. Baugh, 'Naval Power: What Gave the British Navy Superiority?', in Leandro Prados de la Escorura, ed., *Exceptionalism and Industrialisation: Britain and its European Rivals, 1688–1815* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 235–60.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Knight and Martin Wilcox, *Sustaining the Fleet: War, the Navy and the Contractor State 1793–1815* (Woodbridge, 2010); Janet Macdonald, *The British Navy's Victualling Board, 1793–1815: Management Competence and Incompetence* (Woodbridge, 2010). Macdonald is at times highly critical of the victualling commissioners' performance.

<sup>27</sup> Macdonald, *Management Competence and Incompetence*, p. 215.

and organising convoys could all impact on an effective victualling system. It has generally been concluded that 'the Navy's victualling was handled with considerable success'.<sup>28</sup> Detailed analysis is, however, beyond the scope of books on much broader subjects. Michael Steer wrote on victualling operations during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, but his work is limited to the Channel fleet alone.<sup>29</sup> An article written by Aldridge in 1964 is the only piece of scholarship that covers the supplying of a Baltic fleet, and that in the 1720s. It is tentative in its conclusions, with conspicuous use of the word 'suggests' and phrases emphasising the difficulty in estimating the success of the operation.<sup>30</sup> Although it is agreed that Britain made huge advances in the area of naval victualling, how this was effected in particular operations, especially at a time of total war when the nation's resources were put to its strongest test, has not been studied.<sup>31</sup> This book seeks to link operational, administrative, economic and political history to analyse how operational viability was managed. Only a fleet well supplied would be able to bring British naval power fully to bear.

The victualling service is also a window into the workings of the British state and its reforming instincts during the eighteenth century.<sup>32</sup> The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were unprecedented in terms of scale, in which the ambitions of states were recast. No longer were conflicts over

<sup>28</sup> Christopher D. Hall, *British Strategy in the Napoleonic War 1803–15* (Manchester, 1992), p. 41. For similar opinions see Douglas Hamilton, 'Private Enterprise and Public Service: Naval Contracting in the Caribbean, 1720–50', *The Journal for Maritime Research* 6 (2004), pp. 37–64; Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, pp. 484–7.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Steer, 'The Blockade of Brest and the Victualling of the Western Squadron 1793–1805', *MM* 76 (1990), pp. 307–16.

<sup>30</sup> David Denis Aldridge, 'The Victualling of the British Naval Expeditions to the Baltic Sea between 1715 and 1727', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 12/2 (1964), 1–25, pp. 21, 24.

<sup>31</sup> The interaction of administrative and operational naval history has only been examined once, in Christian Buchet, *Marine, économie et société: un exemple d'interaction: l'avitaillement de la Royal Navy durant la guerre de sept ans* (Paris, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> There is a broad literature on the eighteenth century state. See John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power*; P. Harling and P. Mandler, 'From Fiscal-Military State to Laissez-Faire State, 1760–1850', *Journal of British Studies* 32 (1993), 44–70; B. D. Porter, *War and the Rise of the State: The Military Foundations of Modern Politics* (New York, 1974), pp. 36–9, 58–9, 72–121; Philip Harling, *The Waning of 'Old Corruption': The Politics of Economic Reform in Britain, 1779–1846* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 2, 75; Gerald Aylmer, 'From Office-Holding to Civil Service: The Genesis of Modern Bureaucracy', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, part 30 (1980), 91–108; Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society 1680–1730* (London, 1982); W. R. Ward, 'Some Eighteenth Century Civil Servants: The English Revenue Commissioners 1754–98', *English Historical Review* 70 (1955), 25–54, pp. 41–4.

small slices of land, and far-flung imperial possessions. Napoleon aimed at the overthrowing the British body politic: in name and nature this was the first total war. The state therefore used unprecedented means to achieve victory. This involved changes in traditional ideas about office-holders and prompted new attitudes towards reform. The Victualling and Transport Boards, the two major bodies involved in the production and movement of provisions to fleets, can tell us much about the nature of the British state, at war and under pressure to reform. In wartime, together they made up 13.5 per cent of all state expenditure.<sup>33</sup> By looking at these bodies, as they underwent the stress of war, this book shows that the British state was not the corrupt, inefficient organisation portrayed by contemporary reformers and subsequent historians. The successive administrations of Portland, Perceval and Liverpool increased the effectiveness of the British war machine. Faced with the challenges of a hegemonic Napoleonic empire, the British state required a monumental effort to manage the means to victory. In this respect, the fleet sent to the Baltic is a particularly illuminating case. The Baltic Sea was a new challenge for victualling officials; consequently it is a good opportunity to judge the speed with which naval administrators learnt. Secondly, the Baltic fleet's period of action, 1808–12, came just after the Commission of Naval Revision and thus provides an excellent chance to judge the reforming instincts of the British state, and its success in doing so.

The book begins by asserting the primacy of the Baltic Sea, and northern Europe more broadly, within the British political and public spheres. For policy-makers, merchants and the commercial classes of Britain, there was a deep understanding of the region's importance. Chapter 2 considers the evolution of British logistical systems throughout the eighteenth century, detailing the incremental, though by no means continuous, developments that took place. The chapter ends in late 1807 on the eve of the Baltic fleet's departure. In December 1807, a fleet stationed off Rochefort was forced to return to Britain, having not received the necessary food, allowing a French fleet to leave port, and prompting a parliamentary inquiry. In this context of victualling failure, Chapter 3 considers the specific challenges that faced administrators and commanders in 1807–8 as they planned their Baltic strategy. Chapter 4 considers the administrative system that enabled power projection on a global scale, looking at the naval administration from the Admiralty down through the subordinate Transport and Victualling Boards,

<sup>33</sup> Data is from 1797: see 24th Report of the Select Committee on Finance, 1798, Appendix E.1, pp. 49–53. See also NMM, ADM BP/25B, 16 July 1804. Morriss, *Foundations of British Maritime Ascendancy*, p. 102.

## *Introduction*

and considering their respective responsibilities and claims to expertise. It shows how these governmental boards interacted with the private sector, the bedrock of British maritime superiority. The book then takes on a more chronological focus, considering naval operations in northern Europe. This is not a narrow operational history; instead it analyses how operations were shaped by supply and logistics and the administrative, political and economic forces affecting the navy. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the effectiveness of logistical arrangements, the degree to which they improved over time and how this influenced operations. Chapter 7 looks in detail at a series of reforms made in the winter of 1809–10, as the naval administration responded to the victualling failures of 1809, placing them firmly in the context of the reforming tendencies of the British state. The last chapter considers the consequences of these reforms, before analysing the strategic watershed that came with a logistical supremacy. Ultimately, British naval power was grounded in a flexible and stable administration, run by practitioners who could carry out the logistical effort at sea and on land. The British war effort rested on their shoulders.





Figure 2. *Foreign Amusements or the British Lion on the Watch*  
NMM, PAF3936 (London: S. W. Fores, 1801). © National Maritime Museum.

## The Forgotten Theatre: Britain, Northern Europe and the Baltic Sea

THE SECOND HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY saw the European state system transformed by the military rise of Russia. Until this point, Western European issues had dominated international relations. By the 1770s, however, Russia was emerging as the leading continental power in mainland Europe. This prompted a mixture of satisfaction and fear in British political circles. For some, Russia's rise was seen in a positive light, not least by Tories, who saw the country as a counter-balance to French power. For others, though, growing fears over Russia's hegemonic ambition prompted anxious insecurity. As early as 1775 Sir Nathaniel Wraxall had written that Russia seemed a power, 'which we regard ever [*sic*] day as more an object of political terror and watchfulness, and from whose arms has ever been taught to dread another universal monarchy'. Awareness of Catherine II's growing empire became an increasingly prominent theme in the political pamphlets of the era. Sir John Sinclair warned in 1787 that 'all Europe must unite to check the ambition of a sovereign who makes one conquest only a step for the acquisition of another'.<sup>1</sup> Captain David Sutherland, who travelled extensively through the Baltic region, outlined the long-term threat: 'Russia is an evil-disposed, aspiring child; that we now have it in our power to curb her proud spirit; but that if we neglect this opportunity, and allow her to increase in pride and strength, in a few years, perhaps, she may trample on our breast'.<sup>2</sup> Among Whigs and radicals, Russia appeared as a brutal, backward and ultra-conservative nation.

Locked in an all-consuming war with Revolutionary France, successive British governments of the 1790s could only watch as Russia expanded ever eastwards. The partitions of Poland in 1793 and 1795 advanced Russia's

<sup>1</sup> M. S. Anderson, *Britain's Discovery of Russia, 1553–1815* (London, 1958), p. 139. Pamphlet attributed to William Eton, *General Observations regarding the Present State of the Russian Empire* (London, 1787).

<sup>2</sup> David Sutherland, *A Tour up the Straits, from Gibraltar to Constantinople* (London, 1790), p. 336.

European frontier over 250 miles westwards, enhancing her ability to intervene in central Europe, while underlining her new political importance.<sup>3</sup> The destruction of Poland fatally undermined the long-standing idea of Russia as a natural ally. 'Poor conquered Poland' came to symbolise, especially to Whigs, the self-evident Russian threat to Europe.<sup>4</sup> Nor were suspicious eastern glances limited to Russia. The growth of Prussia too raised concerns in Britain, not least owing to its proximity to Hanover. Dynastic concerns continued to dominate Anglo-Prussian relations: in 1801 and 1806 Britain moved to protect the king's patrimony in Hanover.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of these eastern powers gained popular prominence, becoming a concern for pamphleteers, authors and politicians alike. In the caricature in Figure 2 from 1801, the Russian bear is shown firmly gripping the combined Baltic navies, with a watchful British lion poised to act. In the background an army of Prussian eagles marches onwards. 'My brother the Eagle is doing the business by land', states the Russian bear, 'so I'll try a little by water.' This was not merely a concern over the 'balance of power' in Europe. Together, the two nations threatened to dominate the Baltic Sea and the nations that surrounded it. Those commentating from the public sphere, and indeed those in government, had a much more sophisticated understanding of power that took in commerce, economics and resource acquisition. In this respect the rise of Russia and the other Baltic nations offered a long-term threat equal to that of France, as it threatened directly Britain's standing as a maritime nation. This had been noticed much earlier than the 1800s. 'Like an immense Whirlpool', wrote the *London Chronicle* in 1791, 'Russia will by degrees swallow up every neighbouring state, till it becomes, what in fact the present Empress aims at rendering it, the sole independent maritime State in Europe.'<sup>6</sup>

In the caricature in Figure 2, the Russian bear is clutching the combined Baltic fleets in his hands: it was the naval threat that so concerned the vigilant British lion. In 1801, 1807 and finally from 1808 to 1812, the British would be forced to send fleets to the Baltic Sea. This suggests a much more complicated picture, in which British maritime interests prompted

<sup>3</sup> H. M. Scott, *The Emergence of the Eastern Powers, 1756–1775* (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Britain's Discovery of Russia*, pp. 194, 198.

<sup>5</sup> Philip G. Dwyer, 'Prussia and the Armed Neutrality: The Invasion of Hanover in 1801', *The International History Review* 15/4 (November 1993), 661–87; Brendan Simms, 'An Odd Question Enough'. Charles James Fox, the Crown and British Policy during the Hanoverian Crisis of 1806', *The Historical Journal* 38/3 (September 1995), 567–96; V. R. Ham, 'Strategies of Coalition and Isolation. British War Policy and North-West Europe, 1803–1810' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> *London Chronicle*, 2–5 April 1791.



ever greater anxieties. The Baltic emerged as a strategically crucial region in which the growth of Russian power in northern Europe could have devastating effects for Britain, and in defence of which Britain was willing to go to war. Britain was worried less about territory than about economics, resources and a burgeoning naval threat.

*Commerce and the sinews of seapower*

While Russia harboured continental ambitions, the second half of the eighteenth century was also marked by the development of Russian power at sea. The Baltic battle-fleet that had amounted to 54,000 tons in 1770 had nearly trebled to 145,000 tons by 1790. Within twenty years Russia had built the fourth-largest fighting navy in the world. The relative decline of the Dutch fleet during the eighteenth century also moved the naval centre of gravity further eastwards.<sup>7</sup> The Danish navy grew, partly on account of the developing Russian threat. Sweden maintained a constant naval presence. Figure 3 shows the increase in sailing navies throughout the period from 1720 to 1790.

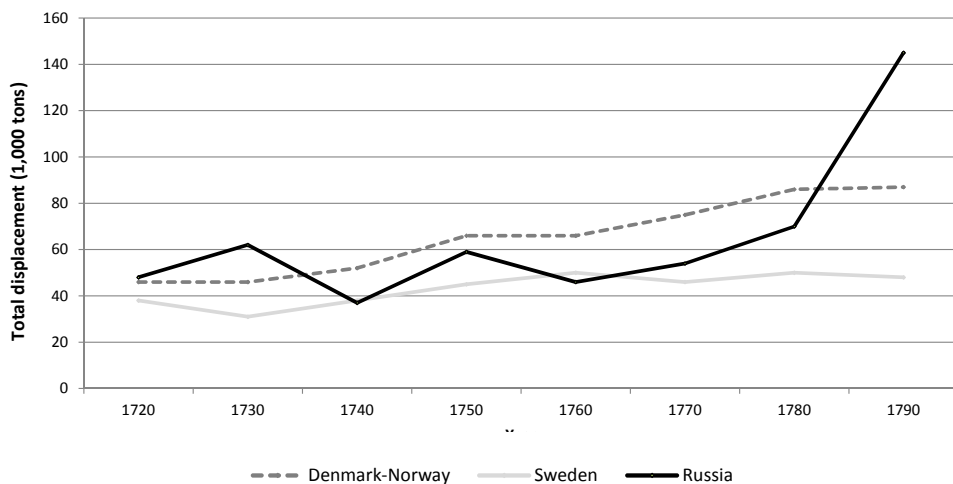


Figure 3. The size of the Baltic sailing navies, 1720–90.

Source: Jan Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies and State Building in Europe and America 1500–1860* (Stockholm, 1993), p. 297.

<sup>7</sup> For the Dutch navy see especially Jaap R. Bruijn, *The Dutch Navy of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia, 1993), pp. 145–214.