



THE NORWEGIAN MERCHANT FLEET IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

KENNETH L PRIVRATSKY

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Second World War

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Pen & Sword
MARITIME

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
Pen & Sword Maritime
An imprint of Pen & Sword Books Limited
Yorkshire – Philadelphia

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ISBN 978 1 39904 386 1

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Typeset by Mac Style
Printed in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.



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And in memory of those in
The Norwegian Shipping and Trade Mission

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Preface

Norwegian heritage goes back eight centuries in my family. My mother was very proud to be one hundred per cent Norwegian, born of immigrant parents arriving in America in the early 1900s from Kristiansund. She raised me to share her pride. I thought I should mention this disclaimer at the start, because the Ukrainian roots of my paternal surname mask that part of my background! I take pride indeed in being half Norwegian and was especially honoured when, in early 2016, one of my cousins there invited me to participate in National Day festivities in Kristiansund on 17 May. That is the day each year when Norwegians celebrate the signing of their country's constitution in 1814. Specifically, I was asked to march in a parade with him and others that morning, to provide remarks when the parade concluded at a memorial for fallen seafarers, and then to lay a wreath in their memory. That experience eventually became the genesis of this book.

I thought I knew quite a lot about the history of Norway and its sagas of the sea extending back to the time of the Vikings. My many years in the military and study of warfare left me feeling confident that I had gained a pretty good understanding of the Second World War as well, including Germany's invasion of Norway in 1940 and the eventual bombing of Kristiansund. As I researched my remarks for that day, however, I came to discover how much I did not know about the invasion and especially the significant support that Norway provided the Allies with during the war despite losing their country to the Germans. I searched for books about Norway's seafarers in preparation for my remarks. The only one in English I found was by Nora Slocum, published in 1969 and entitled *Saga of the Sea: Norway's Merchant Marine in World War II*. That seemed especially relevant, and I bought a used copy on the internet. I discovered it was a translation with two sources: a book by Lisa Lindbaek entitled *Tusen Norske Skip* ('A Thousand Norwegian Ships') published in 1943, and a manuscript of her other material. Lindbaek, a Norwegian, had

been travelling by ship to the United States in the early 1940s when she became stranded in Africa for some unknown reason. While there, she encountered Norwegian seafarers who had been interned. When she eventually reached the States she gained employment as a reporter for the Norwegian-language paper *Nordisk Tidende* in Brooklyn and in that position met other seamen. From her conversations with them Lindbaek compiled notes which later formed the chapters of her book. She referred to it as an anthology of their stories from the seven seas. The gentleman in New York who wrote the foreword for her book was Øivind Lorentzen, the Director of Shipping in the United States for Nortraship, a Norwegian Government organization established in London in the same month that Germany invaded Norway. It managed the largest merchant fleet the world had ever seen. King Haakon VII, as he and others in the Government were fleeing across central Norway from the Germans, personally appointed Lorentzen to head the organization. It proved to be a controversial choice. I had never heard of him or the so-called Nortraship organization he led.

What would compel a woman like Lindbaek to publish a book like this at the height of the war? The answer, I think, is simple. She grasped the enormous contributions that Norwegian shipping and seamen were making at the time. She probably knew what most of us still do not realize, that the small country of Norway, then occupied by the Germans, had become key to the Allied war effort. She wrote as Britain was struggling to protect its ships from German submarines and its homeland from bombers. Ship losses had caused imports to plummet, leading to more and more severe rationing. Her book came out a year after the United States entered the war, as its shipyards were beginning to make up for the losses at sea. Simply put, the merchant fleet from Norway had been helping to keep the Allies in the war until then. Lindbaek saw that. Norway possessed the fourth largest fleet in the world on the eve of the Second World War, and its ships were by far the most modern. A thousand Norwegian ships eventually supported the Allies, starting in 1939 and continuing past the end of the war. There would have been many more had Germany not captured them in Norway. Hundreds of Norwegian ships would sink, and thousands of seamen and women would lose their lives.

I spoke to these losses at the Seafarers' Memorial in Kristiansund before laying a wreath at the monument in their memory. I told the audience

that morning that the Battle of Britain could have had a quite different outcome had it not been for those ships and their crews. It is hard to think otherwise. After all, at that time Norwegian tankers were hauling close to half the oil Britain needed. There would have been considerably less fuel for the Spitfires to burn without the support of those tankers in the year leading up to that fight. The British people would have faced even stricter rationing without the cargo on other Norwegian ships too. President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill and officials on both sides of the Atlantic recognized the value of this help. What surprised me that morning in Kristiansund, however, was discovering how little even the Norwegians around me knew of their country's enormous contribution to the Allied victory. Since then, I have found from many other conversations that those of us outside of Norway know even less.

I would like to think my book helps complete the story Lindbaek and others started. Although much has been written about Germany's invasion of Norway and even about merchant shipping in the Second World War, there remains very little published in English about the contribution of Norway's ships and the organization called The Norwegian Shipping and Trade Mission, nicknamed Nortraship, that was formed to manage them. My intent in *Norway's Merchant Fleet in the Second World War* is to share this little-known story so that it does not simply fade away. I try my best to tell it in the context of the war itself. What happened is not without controversy. Some have accused Norwegian shipowners of profiteering during the wars of the twentieth century. There is certainly a basis for such opinions. There can be little doubt, though, that those aboard Norwegian ships remained far removed from any profits made. Norwegian seafarers who survived those perilous years at sea returned home to confront a war of a different nature. That part of the saga might come as a surprise to readers and reminds us all of what can happen when war heroes eventually come home.

Kenneth L. Privratsky
Major General, US Army (Retired)

Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible without the help of others. Ten years after the end of the Second World War, a Norwegian named Kaare Petersen wrote a book entitled *The Saga of Norwegian Shipping: An Outline of the History, Growth, and Development of a Modern Merchant Marine*, which is available in English and includes chapters on the First and Second World Wars. Nearly forty years later, another book appeared in English edited by Bård Kollveit and entitled *Trade Winds: A History of Norwegian Shipping*. It also included discussion of the involvement of Norway's ships in the wars. Both were very helpful to my research. Without question, the most valuable sources for me were written in Norwegian. The first was Jon Rustung Hegland's two-volume history of his country's shipping during the war entitled *Nortraships Flåte*, published in 1976. It provides details of all ship activity and losses during that war, as well as information on the formation of Nortraship. The second came two decades later in a five-volume study titled *Handelsflåten I Krig 1939–1945*, with books by Atle Thowsen, Bjørn L. Basberg, Guri Hjeltnes and Lauritz Pettersen. These provide an abundance of detail on the formation and inner workings of Nortraship and controversies surrounding the organization, during and after the war, Norway's fleet captured by Germany, and the effects on seamen and their families. These substantive histories have not been translated from Norwegian unfortunately. Therefore, the rest of the world cannot appreciate the full magnitude of what happened. I owe much gratitude to the authors of these sources, which I use extensively in some chapters that follow.

Images used come from a variety of sources. I am particularly indebted to digital collections established by National Archives of Norway and Wikimedia Commons. Use of many images is governed by Creative Commons licences. I have provided an alphanumeric reference for each image in the plate section, and full attributions appear towards the end of the book.

I owe special thanks to my cousin Hilde Rakstang, who located and communicated with Jan Lorentzen, the grandson of Øivind Lorentzen, in Norway. Jan granted me permission to use photographs of his grandfather in this book, and I remain grateful to him.

This book would not be possible without the consideration and assistance of commissioning editor Henry Wilson, a good friend of mine. I appreciate everything he and others at Pen & Sword have done to make publication possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my daughters, Erika and Kylie, and my wife, Kathy, for their support throughout this project. Erika took time out from her busy schedule to develop the maps for this book. Kathy helped me unfailingly, from beginning to end, locating pictures, researching answers to questions, proofreading, and especially tolerating my crankiness for many weeks as I laboured to translate Norwegian! This book is as much hers as mine.

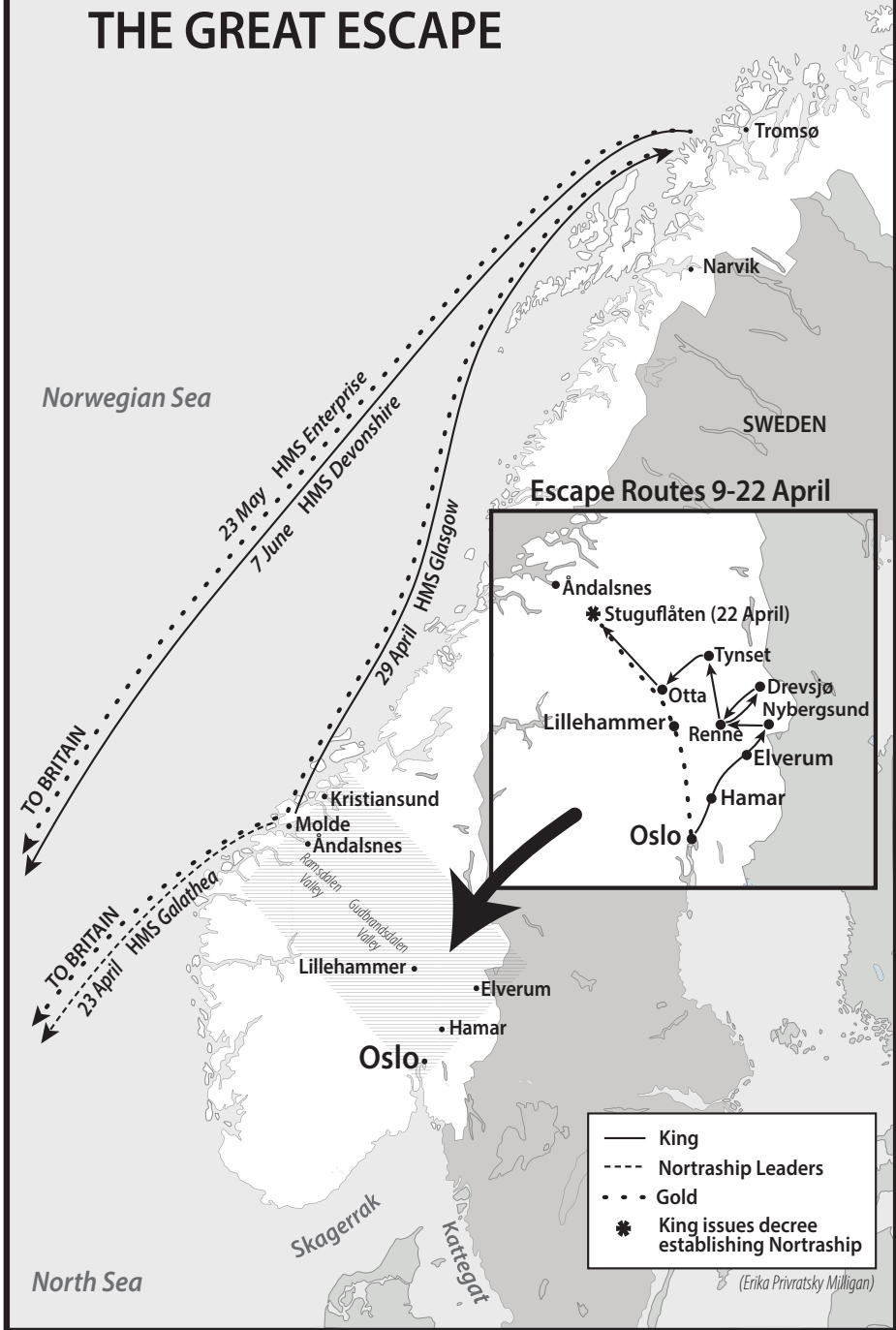
Few books are free of errors, and I expect this one will be no exception. Any mistakes of fact, translation or interpretation are mine alone.

INVASION OF NORWAY

April 1940

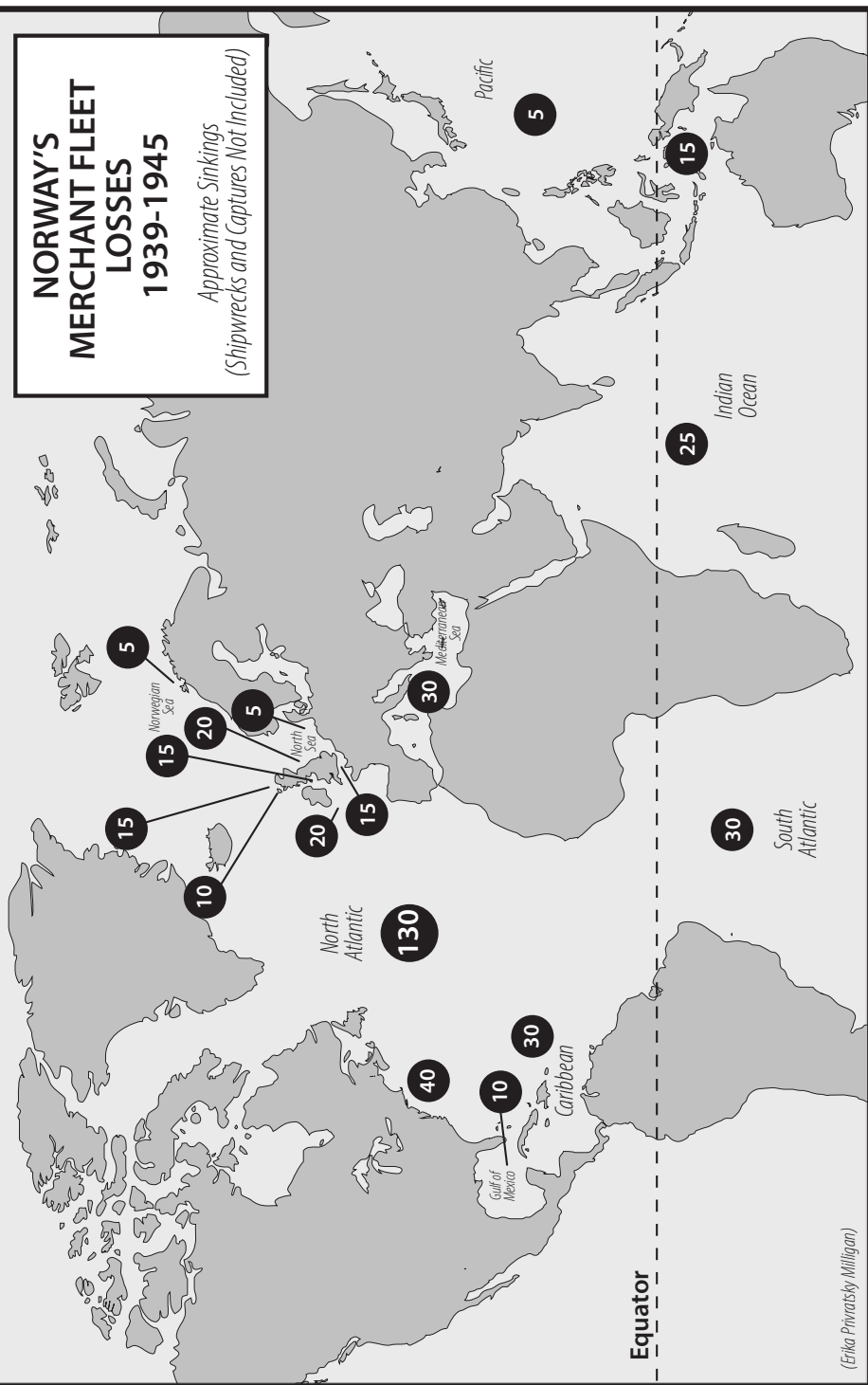


THE GREAT ESCAPE



NORWAY'S MERCHANT FLEET LOSSES 1939-1945

*Approximate Sinkings
(Shipwrecks and Captures Not Included)*



(Erika Privratsky Milligan)

Chapter 1

Norway Emerges as a Giant in Shipping

Seafarers aboard the merchant ship *Ringulv* welcomed the clear skies on the morning of 9 April 1940 as they stood on deck and caught their first glimpses of the Norwegian coastline. Most had been at sea for nearly a year. This recent voyage had started in New York two months earlier. After a brief stop in Canada, they had joined a large convoy crossing the Atlantic with supplies for France and Britain. Army trucks lined the upper deck. A slow, coal-burning steamship, the *Ringulv* had often struggled to keep pace with other ships during rough weather, and when a gale struck during the crossing, she had fallen out of the convoy. It had been particularly frightful for the crew as they steamed onward alone in waters hiding German U-boats. Thankfully, their ship had arrived safely in Le Havre, where she unloaded cargo, and then continued to Swansea to take on Welsh coal for Norway. This would be the last leg of the voyage before the ship returned to New York. Many of the crew were looking forward to seeing families again, if only for a few hours, and sharing gifts purchased in foreign ports. Spirits soared as the coastline neared. Suddenly, without any warning to those on deck, the ship's captain reversed course and took the ship to full power, dashing all hopes of happy homecomings. Those aboard later learned to their dismay that the *Ringulv* was returning to Britain because Germany was in the process of invading Norway. The worst was yet to come for the captain and crew. Days later, with their ship docked in Scotland, they repainted the *Ringulv* and installed an anti-magnetic cable around her hull to protect against magnetic mines. Then they set sail for France with the coal originally intended for Norway. A month later, off the French coast, the Germans boarded the *Ringulv* and took possession of her. They would add the Norwegian merchant ship to their own fleet, and all her crew ended up in concentration camps in Morocco.¹

Thousands of other Norwegians sailing on ships around the world that day in April would discover to their dismay that Germany had just

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invaded their homeland. It came as a surprise not only to them but to the entire world. The fate of the *Ringulv* and her crew would be repeated dozens of times in the following months as the invaders tried to gain control of other Norwegian ships. Many would suffer even worse fates. It probably did not register on crews at the time that they would be out of contact with loved ones for the next five years, or that their ships would become the objects of a protracted tug-of-war, first between Britain and Germany and later between Britain and its closest ally, the United States. They certainly did not realize that Norwegian ships like their own would become the backbone strengthening the chances of an Allied victory in the Second World War. Thousands of them, unfortunately, would perish at sea long before the fighting stopped. The story of why the Norwegian ships had become so important was centuries in the making.

Norway owns a long history as a seafaring nation. The geography of the country almost guarantees that most Norwegians would develop an attraction for the sea, since it captivates so much of the landscape. Over 60,000 miles of rugged coastline weave from the Skagerrak Sea in the south, up Norway's western side bordering the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea, past the Arctic Circle to the Arctic Ocean. Archeologists have discovered carvings and artefacts proving that even the first inhabitants of this land relied on the sea for survival. Fascinating sagas tell of Vikings leaving these shores a millennium ago to pillage villages in Britain, around Europe, into Russia and across the Atlantic to North America. Those stories surely inspired their descendants not to fear the sea but to see it as a source of adventure and livelihood. High mountains, steep cliffs and thick forests constrained inland settlement and made living near the sea attractive because it offered a plentiful supply of food. Hundreds of fishing villages eventually dotted the coastline. Some morphed into ports and shipyards, which could rely on abundant timber for shipbuilding from thickly forested mountains nearby, especially after sawmills made timber work easier. Trade into and out of those ports became essential for day-to-day existence, since the short growing season of the north limited what and how much farmers could bring to markets. The sea simply became necessary for survival for many years. At the start of the nineteenth century, it probably would have been difficult to find a Norwegian who knew nothing of the sea. Many had taken to the sea to earn a living.

Long after the years when Vikings sailed the oceans, Norway had developed the reputation of a good trading partner and an excellent provider of ocean-going transport. Trade was carried by ships with sails, and Norwegian captains mastered many of them. They and their crews were renowned as being among the best. Norway's population numbered about a million at the turn of the nineteenth century. Trade across the North Sea to Britain and south to other countries in Europe was becoming a major contributor to the gross national product of the small Scandinavian country, along with fishing, timber and agriculture. The Napoleonic wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century left many economies in ruin. Embargoes at sea during the wars had reduced imports and exports, affecting production, reducing revenues and eventually causing many businesses, merchants and shipowners to go bankrupt. All nations suffered as an international recession set in. The wars left even more lasting marks on Norway, however. At the time, the Kingdoms of Denmark and Norway were united under King Frederick II, who had supported Napoleon. When the fighting finally ended with Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Norway found itself recovering under the rule of Sweden, the King of Denmark having been forced to cede his lands to his Scandinavian neighbour. It was not a good development. Over the next ninety years, Norway would re-establish itself as a giant in ocean shipping, but it would do so without independence.

At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, ships sailing the world continued to be driven by the winds. Some were small, with just a mast or two for trading in coastal waters. Others were much larger, with three or more masts for faster oceanic travel, some known as 'clipper ships' because they could 'clip' time from voyages with speeds of 14 to 18 knots. It was not until twenty years later that the first steam-powered vessels appeared in ocean-going fleets. Norway was not in a strong position to invest in this new development, which rendered ships faster and no longer reliant on the wind. Norwegian shipping companies were small, generally possessing just a few ships, sometimes founded by families, neighbours or friends coming together with a little money to invest. It was quite common for a company to possess just a single ship. Often owners were just the captain and his wife, one to sail the ship and find cargo and the other to keep the books. Captains hired a crew and navigated their vessels from port to port, depending on the winds, to solicit cargo until their holds were

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full. They exercised complete control over schedules, destinations and cargo. This was the common practice of shipping at the time, not just for Norwegian companies. It became known as 'tramp trade' and ships took on the nickname of 'tramps' because they travelled from place to place without regular schedules. Norway's comparatively smaller ships remained especially suited to such business.

Destinations for Norwegian ships in the first part of the nineteenth century remained restricted to the British Isles and the European continent. Navigation laws over the years prevented countries like Norway from participating in other markets further away. Some governments started loosening protection in the 1820s and 30s, and thereafter Norwegian tramps extended their trading routes into other hemispheres, depending on weather and winds. The large trading opportunities with the British Empire remained closed until Queen Victoria opened these markets to foreign competition when she signed the repeal of the Navigation Act in 1849. Norway then became one of the countries trading to and from the dozens of British colonies. As such protectionist barriers kept falling, more and more countries began participating in global trade. Norwegian ships soon were carrying the country's main exports of fish and timber around Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope into completely new markets and returning with a wide range of new imports for their countrymen to enjoy.

Norwegian shipyards were also small at this time, specializing in using the country's abundant timber resources to build wooden ships. Steamships were not only much more expensive; they required materials like iron or steel, both of which Norway lacked, as well as bigger shipyards.² These new ships became larger than ships with sails because of the added space needed for their sizeable power plants and additional crew. They also required significant amounts of coal to fire the boilers that propelled the ships, a source of energy that Norway had to import in large quantities just for its homes and businesses. Sailing ships were much cheaper to operate because the wind provided a free source of power; however, contrary winds could also restrict both speed and direction. Thus, with their limited financial resources and less access to government funds, Norwegian shipowners kept increasing their fleets by adding more sailing ships, many of which were older and purchased from Sweden.³ As the years went by, iron and steel replaced wood in the hulls of some of these ships.

The middle of the century brought other new opportunities for small countries with shipping capabilities. The Crimean War pushed the warring nations to their limits because of the long supply lines into areas where few ports existed. They looked to neutral countries like Norway to help move what they needed, and they paid shippers well. Norwegian shipowners diverted ships from trade elsewhere to take advantage of the lucrative opportunities to haul war cargo, and in the process they continued to expand their fleets with more sailing ships, most of them acquired second-hand from countries investing in the newer steamships. When gold was discovered in the United States, many Europeans caught the gold fever, and Norwegian ships commenced sailing around Cape Horn to take advantage of the gold rush. Then interest in travel abroad spurred the development of ships designed specifically for transporting passengers to distant places. Shipowners sought those opportunities as well. By 1870, Norway's population was approaching two million, double what it had been at the start of the century, and the country's fleet had grown to be the third largest in the world. Several thousand ships were registered to fly the Norwegian flag, and shipping had grown to be the primary source of revenue for the small country. For the first time in its history, many in Norway were prospering, but the prosperity was to be short-lived.⁴

In 1873, shortage of money, speculative investments and cost overruns in high capital projects in Europe and North America led to stock markets crashing. People rushed to withdraw their savings. Banks closed, and numerous bankruptcies followed. A depression persisted for over a decade, pushing millions of workers worldwide out of work. Over the next three decades, hundreds of thousands of Norwegians fled their homeland seeking opportunities elsewhere, mostly in the United States. In Norway, where shipping had grown to be the country's primary source of revenue, shipowners suffered like others as trading opportunities vanished. When conditions eventually improved, they found themselves in no position to invest in the new steam-turbine technology that had inspired investment prior to the depression.

Other countries, especially Great Britain, where industrialization had produced huge advances, had begun by this time to invest hugely in the new steamships. It was not until the end of the century that steamship construction and purchases picked up in Norway. In the 1890s, Norway

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ranked sixth among all nations in the world in the construction of steamships. In terms of actual tonnage in global trade, that amounted to a mere 2 per cent. The mainstay of steamship building remained Britain; by the end of the nineteenth century its shipyards were building 74 per cent of all steamships sailing the oceans.⁵ The British merchant fleet was by far the largest in the world and would remain so for many years.

The overall nature of shipping changed in the latter half of the century as well, and although Norway began to adapt, it did so much more slowly than other countries. The first change had to do with markets. Coal-fired steam engines made ships faster, and because they were no longer dependent on wind their passages became more reliable. Customers learned to like the predictable arrival and departure times of these new ships. It enabled them to order products and plan deliveries to or from ports better. In the years ahead, the potential for regularity in ocean shipping would produce a new service called 'liner trade', whereby shipowners would enter into agreements to provide scheduled deliveries. It was quite different to the tramp trade that had been common for decades with Norwegian ships. Shipbuilders started constructing faster and bigger ships to accommodate the added interest in this new trade. Known as 'liners', the new ships routinely contained on-board cranes to make them self-sufficient in loading and unloading in port. Steamship owners hired networks of agents to market their services, secure cargo and help synchronize its arrival and departure; their captains no longer had to go ashore to tout for cargo to fill their holds. Norwegian shipowners, in contrast, continued to be satisfied with their cheaper, second-hand sailing vessels operating in niche tramp markets.

Another major development that had an extraordinary impact on shipping was the demand for petroleum products spurred by the second phase of the industrial revolution. For centuries, liquids had moved in small quantities in casks and barrels. The discovery of large oil fields in the Americas and later in the Middle East drove a new interest in specialized ships capable of hauling liquids in bulk quantities, measured not in gallons but in thousands of tons. The first sail-driven tankers appeared in the 1860s. Steam-powered tankers followed a decade later. As motorization took hold around the world, demand for such tanker ships would increase exponentially for years to come.

Thus, as the nineteenth century ended, shipping had changed considerably. It had become competitive and global. Steamships now were carrying two-thirds of all cargo worldwide, and 75 per cent of those ships continued to be built in British shipyards.⁶ Britain remained the dominant country by far in global shipping. Its merchant ships represented half of the entire world's fleet, and over half of British vessels by this time were steamships. No country depended more on its shipping, though, than Norway. It could claim the world's fourth largest fleet, with 3,325 ships of various sizes and types. Only half of these were suitable for ocean trade, the rest being restricted to coastal shipping. Nonetheless, the ocean-going ships had penetrated markets in many places. On a per capita basis, the fleet carried a whopping 1,227 tons per Norwegian. That might not seem much until it is compared to the three nations with bigger fleets: Britain's carried 667 tons per inhabitant, Germany's 96 tons, and the United States' 63 tons.⁷ Unfortunately, however, Norway's fleet was losing its lustre in the marketplace at the turn of the new century. Shippers around the world continued to regard Norwegian ship captains and crews highly, but they now saw Norwegian ships as old and outdated. Despite producing substantial revenue for shipowners and the government, the Norwegian fleet remained largely powered by the prevailing winds. Old ships with sails still monopolized a fleet that was becoming increasingly less competitive.

The big news for Norwegians as their country entered the twentieth century was the return of full independence from Sweden. The relationship between the two Scandinavian countries had been relatively good over the decades since Norway had become subordinated to its neighbour, but in 1905 Norwegian citizens voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to approve a return to the constitutional monarchy that had existed in 1814. They chose Prince Charles of Denmark to be their king. King Haakon VII, as he became named, would never forget that the people had elected him. The will of the people would guide his decision-making during his reign and become very important as the world erupted into wars.

It is also likely that the Norwegians never forgot why they had lost their independence nearly a hundred years before. After the country had found itself on the losing side in the Napoleonic Wars, Norway took no sides in other conflicts, while the country's shipping industry made a great deal of money supporting the war efforts of other nations. A quarter of a century