

**THE GERMAN FLEET: BEING THE  
COMPANION VOLUME TO "THE  
FLEETS AT WAR" AND "FROM  
HELIGOLAND TO KEELING  
ISLAND"**

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The German Fleet: Being the Companion Volume To "The Fleets at War" And "From Heligoland to Keeling Island" by Archibald Hurd

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**ARCHIBALD HURD**

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# THE GERMAN FLEET

BEING THE COMPANION VOLUME TO "THE FLEETS AT WAR"  
AND "FROM HELIGOLAND TO KEELING ISLAND."

BY

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AND ECONOMIC BASIS."

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## THE GERMAN FLEET

### CHAPTER I

#### PAST ASCENDENCY

LIKE the foundations of the Empire in 1870, the formation of the modern German Fleet is the result of a movement that had its origin among the people and not among the Princes of the country. And this naval movement sprang up and reached its greatest vigour in those sea-board districts that still sedulously keep alive the splendid tradition of the Hanseatic League, which, as the strongest maritime Power of its day, for centuries almost monopolized the trade of Northern and Western Europe, and with the word "sterling," a corruption of "Easterling," the name popularly given to its members, has left on Great Britain the indelible stamp of its former mercantile domination. For the coin of the Hanse towns, by reason of its unimpeachable quality, was once universally sought after in England, and thus became the standard of monetary excellence.

The memories of the Hansa are the "historical foundation" on which have been based Germany's claims to a leading place among the maritime nations, and they have played a prominent part in every agitation for the increase of her fleet. Why, it was

asked, should she not again assume upon the seas that dominating position which she once undoubtedly held? Why, with her expanding population, trade, and wealth, should she not reclaim that maritime ascendancy which she forfeited to Holland in the seventeenth century, and which a hundred years later passed to Great Britain? Why should she not realize that dream which was in the mind of Friedrich List when he wrote: "How easy it would have been for the Hanse towns, in the epoch of their rule over the sea, to attain national unity through the instrumentality of the imperial power, to unite the whole littoral from Dunkirk to Riga under one nationality, and thus to win and maintain for the German nation supremacy in industry, trade, and sea-power!"

It is, moreover, not without significance that the Hansa itself was, in a sense, democratic, and that, at a time when Germany, as a national unit, was rendered impotent in the world by her superabundance of Princes, her citizens were able, on their own initiative, and by their own energies, to assert their power and capacity as a maritime people.

The story of the Hansa is full of strange anomalies and antitheses. Historians differ by centuries as to the date at which the existence of the League commenced, and just as it never had a definite beginning, so it has never had a formal end, for to this day two of the Hanse towns—Hamburg and Bremen—have certain institutions in common, such as their supreme law courts and their diplomatic representation in Prussia. For hundreds of years the Confederation acted, and was treated by foreign Governments, as an independent State and a great Power, but its composition was never certain and always fluctuating. From first to last the names of no fewer than ninety cities

and towns were entered upon its rolls, but it is impossible to say of each of them how often and when it joined or left the League. Foreign rulers, and especially the English monarchs, made repeated attempts to obtain from the Hansa an official list of its members, but compliance with their demands was systematically evaded on one pretext or another. The League's policy was, as far as possible, to assert the claims of its members, and to disown responsibility for those made against them. This policy is pretty clearly expressed in the following answer returned by the League in 1473 to complaints put forward on behalf of English merchantmen who had suffered through the depredations of the Dantzic privateer or pirate, Paul Beneke: "The towns of the Hansa are a corpus in the possession of the privileges they hold in any realms, lands, or lordships, and when their privileges are infringed, they are accustomed to meet and consult, and then to issue for all of them ordinances against all goods from the countries in which their privileges have been infringed, that they shall not be suffered in the commonalty of towns. But they were not making war against England; only some of the towns of the Hansa, which had been injured by England, had determined upon it at their own venture, win or lose, which did not take place in the name of the Hanse commonalty." The theory of the Federation was, in fact, that it existed for the purpose only of taking, and not of giving, and it refused to imply a corporate responsibility by publishing its membership rolls.

It is impossible, in the space available, to tell in any detail the fascinating story of the rise of the Hansa to the position of a great power, with its guild



## The German Fleet

halls and factories in foreign lands, of which the oldest and most important was the Steelyard, in London. The history of this institution is believed to go back to the latter days of the Roman occupation. When the Hanseatic League was at the height of its power—from the last quarter of the fourteenth to the first half of the sixteenth centuries, the Steelyard, in London, closely resembled a state within a larger state. It occupied a site now covered by Cannon Street Station, extending from Thames Street to the river, and bounded to the east and west respectively by All Hallows and Cousins Lane. The Steelyard had something of the appearance of a fortress and was stoutly defended against attack. The community within its precincts was governed with monastic severity. Their affairs were administered by an alderman with the assistance of two adjuncts and nine counsellors who took part in all the State and civic pageants of London as a Corporation.

This great German commercial institution on British soil, and the other houses established in other countries, reflected the great power which was wielded by the Hanseatic League in commerce. These German traders, however, realised that their increasing trade on the seas required adequate defence. Mainly at the instigation of the merchants of Lubeck, a considerable navy was created, this German city being dependent for its prosperity mainly upon the herring fishing and curing industries of Europe. In process of time the Germans succeeded in driving away English, French and Spanish rivals, and created a great monopoly of the herring fisheries of northern Europe, from which they drew immense wealth and on which depended a number of other industries.

It was mainly for the protection of the Sound

herrings that the Hansa undertook against the Scandinavian States the numerous campaigns by which it won the keys of the Baltic. The war which culminated with the peace of Spralsunde in 1370 raised the League to the rank of a first-class sea Power. Encouraged by its success in crushing and humiliating Denmark, the Hansa had little hesitation in measuring itself against England. The towns became associated through the Victualling Brothers with an active form of corsair warfare on English shipping.

By its triumph over the Danes, the Hansa secured a practical monopoly of the shipping and trade of the Baltic and North Sea, which it held almost unimpaired for nearly two hundred years. In the words of Gustav Wasa, "the three good (Scandinavian) Crowns remained small wares of the Hansa up to the sixteenth century," and as long as this was so the commercial and maritime supremacy of the League was practically unchallengeable. The manner in which the Easterlings availed themselves of the ascendancy they had now acquired is a classic example of the ruthless and unscrupulous exploitation of political power for the purposes of purely material gain, for they were actuated by no national or ideal aims, but solely by the desire to enrich themselves. Favoured by the confusion and chaos prevailing in the lands of their potential rivals, they became the exclusive brokers through whose mediation the spices of the Orient, the wines of France, the cloth of Flanders, the tin, wool, hides, and tallow of England, were exchanged for the dried cod of Norway, the ores of Sweden, the wheat of Prussia, the honey and wax of Poland, the furs of Russia, and the myriads of herrings which every summer were caught in the Sound, and salted and packed on the coast of Scania.

What they aimed at, and what for long years they substantially obtained, was the disappearance of all flags but their own from the North Sea and the Baltic. Moreover, a great part of the carrying trade between England and France also fell to their lot.

The conditions were such as rendered warlike operations between England and the Teutonic order inevitable. It is impossible to trace in any detail the guerilla tactics which were adopted on both sides. It is only necessary for our present purpose to convey some idea of the sea power which the Hansa exercised in order that we may better understand the ambitions of Germany to which the Emperor William the Second and Grand Admiral von Tirpitz gave expression in the early years of the twentieth century. At the outset of its career, its warships were manned by the burghers themselves, but as the fleet increased in size—it was quadrupled during the first half of the fifteenth century—recourse to mercenaries became more and more general. The commanders of the ships were invariably citizens of the towns which had equipped them, and were frequently members of the governing council, while the admiral of a fleet was always a councillor, and usually a burgomaster. The officers of the land forces, which were raised as occasion demanded, were principally drawn from the impoverished nobility, whose members welcomed any opportunity of repairing their shattered fortunes by martial adventure. Of the naval resources of the League, some idea can be formed from the fact that, in the war against the Scandinavian Kingdoms in 1426, it sent out a fleet of 260 ships, manned by 12,000 sailors and fighting men. For the exhausting, if not inglorious, seven years' war against Gustav Wasa's successor, Lübeck alone fitted out 18 men-of-