

# **SHIPPING AFTER THE WAR**

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Shipping after the war by J. M. Robertson

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**J. M. ROBERTSON**

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BY

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## SHIPPING AFTER THE WAR

### I

ONE of the current proposals for the control of trade after the war is a call for partial or general renewal of the old measures known as the Navigation Laws. It is commonly put in the form of a demand that after the war, as at present, no German ship shall be permitted to enter any port in the British Empire. So far as the propaganda has been organised, however, it takes a form which does not directly indicate that aim, but seems to point to action of a more far-reaching kind. On April 3rd, a deputation from the Associated Chambers of Commerce waited upon Mr. Bonar Law and Mr. Runciman, and submitted, "among other resolutions," the following:

That action should be taken by the Government to amend the existing Navigation Laws under which *subsidized foreign ships* can make use of British ports and obtain the benefit of harbour facilities while escaping the payment of harbour dues.

As most people will admit the *prima facie* propriety of making all ships alike pay reasonable dues for whatever harbour facilities they enjoy, and this whether they are subsidized or not, the resolution as a whole, and the

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words italicized in particular, would seem to have been chosen for the purpose rather of covering than of explaining what it is that is really desired.

As it happens, the copy of the resolution in the *Times* of April 3rd is published under the significant heading of "British Trade for British Ships," and is followed by an interesting article "From a Correspondent," which begins with the remark that "This resolution *raises the whole question of the famous Navigation Acts* which first came into being during the Commonwealth, and long exercised important influence on British trade." It would seem reasonable, then, to infer that in some more or less influential quarters it is proposed to revive the policy of the Navigation Acts, either as regards Germany alone or for sea-borne commerce in general. Such a proposal challenges the most careful consideration. If it be possible by the method of the Navigation Acts to keep British trade at a permanent advantage as against that of Germany, no humanitarian scruples need restrain us. The real question is simply, How would it work? And as the supporters of the scheme evidently regard the Navigation Acts as something of an instructive example, the first step may fitly be to trace their actual history and their effects.

The *Times* correspondent gives a quite accurate account of their establishment; but he might usefully have told something of the series of old Navigation Acts which preceded them, and which had the same object. In 1381, under Richard II., in order to "increase the navy of England, which is now greatly diminished," it was enacted that no English subject should either export or import merchandise save in English bottoms. There is no trace of any gain in consequence to the English marine; and in 1409

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Henry IV. permitted relaxations to the merchants of Venice, doubtless for value received. Both Richard III. and Henry VII. tried monopoly measures, the latter enacting that in order to save the navy—that is, shipping in general—from ruin, no exports should go out save in English bottoms; and that Gascony wines and Toulouse woad should be imported only in such. Seventy years later an Act of Edward VI. (1552) gravely explains that whereas the latter provisions had been designed to keep wine and woad cheap, they had, on the contrary, grown progressively dearer, “and the navy of the realm thereby never the better maintained.” The discovery must have been made some generations earlier; but to act upon it was another matter. In 1552 the interest of the consumer temporarily got the upper hand, and importation was allowed in foreign bottoms during eight months of the year.

Under Elizabeth the Act of Henry VII. was first repealed (1559), and then after a few years re-enacted, as part of a policy of temperance reform and of shipping expansion by way of compulsory fish-eating on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The Wednesday law, however, was repealed in 1584, it having been realised that freedom to export had a better effect on the fishing industry than “politic” compulsion to eat fish. It is further probable that all the old restrictive Acts were extensively evaded. The repealing Act of the first year of Elizabeth had declared that through them “there hath not only grown great displeasure between the foreign princes and the king of this realm, but also merchants have been sore grieved and endamaged” by the retaliations of foreign States. These were, in fact, the inevitable accompaniments of the policy; and peace-seeking princes like Eliza-



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both and James were consequently indisposed to extend it, though they assiduously promoted monopolies at home.

The rise of English Colonial power, however, evoked new demands for a monopolist policy in shipping; and a new era of Navigation Laws began with an Order in Council of 1646-7 (adumbrated in 1639) prohibiting the "plantations" to ship any of their produce save in English bottoms. This was supposed, or at least declared, to be a way of encouraging Colonial trade; and obviously it would tend to help English shipping in that direction, while preventing the Colonists from trading directly with any other country. And the foreign country chiefly affected was Holland, which at that time had most of the carrying trade of Europe, and was beginning to figure as the natural enemy of England, Spain having as such receded into the background. In 1624 there had occurred the massacre of Amboyna, when the two countries were actually allies, and their common hostility to Spain prevented a breach. But the memory remained; and the jealous exclusiveness of the Dutch in the East—which was in marked contrast with their practice of Free Trade in their home ports—developed a new commercial hostility.

In due course the English Ordinance of 1647 was followed by a diplomatic move on the part of Holland, which secured from the King of Denmark a commutation of shipping dues in the Sound for an annual payment, on condition that no other nation was to have the same privilege. Then it was that, after Cromwell's victory at Worcester, there was passed the Navigation Act of 1651. It provided that no produce of any country in Asia, Africa or America should be imported into any territory of the Commonwealth save in vessels owned by Englishmen or inhabitants of English Colonies, and manned by crews of which more

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than half were of English nationality; while the produce of any part of Europe was to be imported only in English vessels or in vessels owned in the country in which it was produced or manufactured.

By this measure the Dutch trade with the English Colonies was practically put an end to, the Dutch being then above all things carriers, with little produce of their own. That produce (mostly butter and cheese) not being saleable in the tropics, they could have no cargo for the outward voyage to the West Indies. Further, though Dutch-cured fish might rationally have been reckoned Dutch produce, both salt fish and fish oil were put on the prohibited list; and dairy produce, for which there was little English demand, remained for a time the only cargo for Dutch ships trading with England. A natural sequel to the Act of 1651 was a war between the two Republics. It was not directly caused by the Act, being grounded on reciprocal injuries previously inflicted in trade quarrels; but it might easily have been averted save for the tempers created by the monopoly measures of both countries. The massacre of Amboyna, passed over when it occurred in 1624, was made one of the grounds of strife in 1651. After the war had continued some time, many English merchants were anxious to end it without pressing their claims for compensation. Twenty years' profits had been swallowed up in the struggle; the Sound had been closed to English trade; and the costs of the war, which Parliament had vainly sought to defray by confiscation of many hundreds of Royalists' estates, had caused the imposition of heavy new taxation. Thus began a generation of chronic strife between two Protestant nations, originally and naturally friends.

It is fair to say that the honours were even. Both

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sides had given and received abundant provocation; and in 1652, when English privateers were bringing into port for trial Dutch ships suspected of having French goods on board, though the Court of Admiralty freed the ships and even awarded compensation for delay, English sailors took revenge for Amboyna—and other things—by torturing Dutch sailors to make them confess to carrying French goods.<sup>1</sup>

After such quarrels had led to actual naval war, it was natural that at the Restoration, in 1660, the Navigation Act should be strengthened. Both exports and imports were forbidden to the Colonies save in English or Colonial ships whereof the master and three-fourths of the crew were English; and the same standard of English flag and manning was applied to home imports of non-European produce, as well as to the English coasting trade. In 1661, further, it was enacted that English recognition should be given only to ships built as well as owned in England.

As regarded the Colonies, this policy, though to a large extent evaded, admittedly laid the basis for the friction which ultimately caused the loss of those of North America. It is quite fair to say, with Mr. J. A. Doyle, that English statesmen of the seventeenth century are not to be blamed for the inability to foresee what was to happen under changed conditions a century later. We are really not concerned here and now to blame anybody in the business. What we are concerned to ascertain is just what happened—what were the actual effects on trade and shipping of the Navigation Acts.

<sup>1</sup> Gardiner, "History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1649, 56," ed. 1903, ii., 170.