



## Royal United Services Institution. Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors  
and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rusi19>

### German War Writers on the "U" - Boat Warfare

Thomas F. A. Smith

Published online: 12 Nov 2009.

To cite this article: Thomas F. A. Smith (1917) German War Writers on the "U" -  
Boat Warfare, Royal United Services Institution. Journal, 62:448, 793-799, DOI:  
[10.1080/03071841709433704](https://doi.org/10.1080/03071841709433704)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03071841709433704>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly



## GERMAN WAR WRITERS ON THE "U"-BOAT WARFARE.

By THOMAS F. A. SMITH.

---

A STRIKING feature of German propaganda literature is the astute manner in which English literature—ancient and modern—has been exploited in blackening England's fair fame. Anything and everything which Englishmen have written derogatory to their own country has been unearched for home and neutral consumption by German propagandists. Defoe's "True-born Englishman" and Bernard Shaw's superficial generalities, with a host of other things, have all supplied the German "David" with pebbles to hurl at the British "Goliath." It all reminds one of the schoolboy's tag concerning the effect of "sticks and stones" compared with the hurt caused by "calling names."

Another domain for exploitation has been the bitter caricatures which Frenchmen and Englishmen have drawn to represent each other during the last two centuries. In short, practically everything nasty which either one of the Entente Powers has ever said, written, or drawn to attack any of the others has been pressed into the service.

Some two centuries ago a Dutchman wrote a book on "The English Tyrant." That has been reproduced in its original form and scattered broadcast throughout Holland—and America too, if the British Fleet had not been where it was. Another instance is a book by a Belgian—Eugen Detmolder—called "Albion's Death Struggle." The book is a scurrilous attack on this country written during the Boer War, which, as the German translator says, "gives it an added piquancy now that England poses as Belgium's 'protector.'"

The same method has been applied to every phase of the war, but especially when Germany had reason to put some particular odium from herself on to her opponents. Ruthless submarine warfare has found several apologists of this type. Writers endeavour to justify Germany's latest methods by discovering supposed, invented, or real wrongs committed by England during her long history. But none of them appears to remember that Germany's commercial birth and extraordinary maritime development are unthinkable if the British Fleet had not put the high seas in order before their advent.

Admiral Carl Hollweg's book, "Our Right to 'U'-Boat Warfare,"<sup>1</sup> was completed in the middle of January, 1917. Internal evidence—the large number of quotations from British naval writers, newspapers, etc., down to the date of publication—stamps the work "semi-official."

---

<sup>1</sup> Contreadmiral Carl Hollweg: "Unser Recht auf den U-Bootskrieg." Berlin, 1917.

It is hardly conceivable that one author could have collected so much material from enemy sources without the aid of Berlin's propaganda centre. The date of publication, too, makes it probable that the work was intended to anticipate opposition at home, and disgust in neutral countries, at the submarine policy opened on February 1st.

Looked at from this point of view, Admiral Hollweg's book gains in interest. Its fundamental note is that England has committed so many violations of right, law, and justice that Germany has a complete indulgence to use any weapons or methods she pleases.

Admiral Hollweg opens his argument with these words:—"These considerations are intended to strengthen the feeling of right within us—indeed, the feeling that it is our duty—to make use of any and all weapons we possess with the utmost ruthlessness."

The lengthy quotations, supported by the author's own sophistry, cited to justify submarine ruthlessness, may be summarized in a sentence. The "U"-boat is a new weapon, unforeseen by any existing naval laws, and therefore it is not bound to render obedience to them. "We may say," he writes, "without departing a hairbreadth from the truth, that no naval laws exist to-day either for the belligerents or neutrals. Accordingly each Power is free to act as its vital interests demand and do anything which it possesses the might to perform."

The book contains a great deal on the "blockade" of Germany, written in a strain which betrays where the shoe pinches, and occasionally the Admiral quotes the Scriptures to support his argument. "The illegal blockade goes on. England has cut off Germany and the neighbouring neutrals from every branch of commerce which does not suit her. Her naval power swings the whip of hunger over all Europe to compel enemies and neutrals alike to submit to her will. Even St. John, in the Book of Revelations, Chapter XIII., verses 16 and 17, spoke prophetically of this unbearable naval tyranny."

Germany's counter-stroke to parry the thrust against "Prussian militarism" has been an endeavour to raise a hue and cry against "England's navalism." Of course, the numerous propaganda works on this question ignore the fact that British naval power has, on the whole, been employed in a disinterested manner, bringing benefits to a large number of nations besides the British. It would be a vain search to seek instances showing that Prussian militarism had played a similar emancipating rôle in history to that of the British Fleet. Yet it is to be feared that Germany has not been entirely unsuccessful in influencing some neutrals at least. The passages already quoted show that Hollweg is appealing to neutrals, and the succeeding one further illustrates the point. "It is our honest conviction that to-day we are fighting with the neutrals for their future rights on the sea. And therein lies the great significance of the 'U'-boat warfare in the present struggle, that it serves as the pioneer of a future freedom of the seas; that it will destroy the obsolete, harmful theory of the 'invincibility of sea power' which has hung like a sword of Damocles over the heads of the weaker sea powers; and that it will tear the whip of hunger from the hands of English naval despotism for all eternity."

The writer, however, neglects to paint a picture of a future freedom of the seas under "U"-boat despotism. Like many other writers, Admiral Hollweg doubts the possibility of forcing England to sue for peace by starvation caused by submarine warfare. They dispute even that that is the aim in view, but rather that it is the destruction of the maritime fleet till an irreducible minimum is reached.

It is argued that Britain must have a certain amount of tonnage—known in British governmental and shipping circles—necessary for her existence after the war. Assuming it to be ten million tons, or thereabouts, the German claims that a time must come at the present rate of destruction when Britain will have been reduced to that minimum. As a consequence she will then immediately ask for peace terms. No German writer appears to believe that the amount of tonnage built per month can equal the amount sunk, hence the circles interested in shipping and commerce will compel the Government to make peace before their future is annihilated.

German soldiers and sailors have both written many books relating their personal experiences in the war.

Among the "U"-boat tales Count Forstner's narrative, "As 'U'-boat Commander against England," is one of the least egoistic. In an early chapter a passage occurs which throws a little light on the Hun conspiracy to enthral the world. Writing of his training for submarine service a few years before the war, he says:—"It was wise on our part in pre-war days not to boast of our progress in 'U'-boat construction, like our enemies did of their every little development. We knew then that our time was coming! Hence in the war on land and on sea we have been able to employ new, almost unknown, weapons against our enemies, and have succeeded in giving them many painfully unpleasant surprises." He also confirms the fact that the German Fleet was mobilized about the middle of July, 1914. The German Chancellor, however, while thumping the President's table in the Reichstag on August 4th of the same year, said that "not a single man had been mobilized before August 1st."

The Count's story of his first victim runs:—"The sun was laughing down on us as we lay off the Meuse lightship after having examined a ship, which had proved to our satisfaction that she really was a neutral. Just then a steamer which was steering in our direction betrayed the fact that she was English by suddenly changing her course. Before we had time to hoist the 'stop' signal, she was in full flight. After urging our engines to their utmost we signalled, 'Stop at once or I fire!' But this had not the slightest effect.

"We saw with feelings of satisfaction that the distance between us was gradually lessening, but the Englishman still hoped to get away, and ever-thickening clouds of smoke issued from the steamer's funnel. Several warning shots were sent across her bows and ignored, so the next was placed right in the ship's body. This had the desired effect, for three short whistles notified the enemy's intention to reverse his engines. The next order was, 'Leave ship at once!' and this being obeyed without demur, the next shot struck the burning vessel on the waterline.

"The crew, about twenty-five in number, accepted our offer to tow them to the lightship, but before long we fell in with a Dutch ship which took them on board. Then we watched the blazing wreck till it disappeared beneath the waves—one ship the fewer of England's maritime marine to plough the furrows of the world's oceans."

Some of the writers give glimpses of life on board a "U"-boat. When submerged for a number of hours on end the men suffer severely from nausea, loss of appetite, and sea-sickness. Smoking below deck is forbidden, and the atmosphere becomes appalling in spite of limited supplies of compressed air. In foggy weather look-out is kept not only on deck, but a good part of the crew must stand at the listening stations below to listen for the throb of engines or the burr of propellers. The listening stations are mechanical devices to catch the waves of sound which, as is well-known, are more rapidly transmitted by water than by air. There are descriptions of "U"-boat traps, and Captain Koenig in his book, "The Voyage of the Deutschland" to America and back, tells a thrilling story of how his commercial submarine got stuck at the bottom of the North Sea while evading a British destroyer. "I was just going to give the order to start the oil engines when I caught sight of an enemy destroyer. With a single bound I was inside the tower, and closed the hatch. 'Alarm!' 'Submerge!' 'Flood the tanks!' 'Sink her sixty feet!' were the commands, shouted in quick succession, but carrying them out was quite another matter. The sea was stormy, and according to all experience, to submerge under such conditions was sheer madness. But down we had to go, for the destroyer might already have seen us.

"The air hissed in all the tones of the scale as it rushed from the tanks. I was standing with pressed lips watching the raging sea and waiting for the first signs that we were going under, but ever and again the waves brought the boat to the surface. We had not a second to lose, so I gave her more deep rudder, and shouted:—'Both engines at full power!' The vessel trembled, made a couple of vicious plunges, and then cut downwards through the dark waters, the twilight disappeared from the tower ports, and the manometre showed in quick succession six, eighteen, thirty feet of depth. Suddenly there was a violent shock, and we, together with everything which was not nailed down, were all mixed up on the lower deck.

"What had happened? Why was the boat at such a remarkable angle? And why did the engines rush round at intervals as if possessed? Before we could find answers to these and other questions, the chief engineer clambered to his feet and put the indicator to 'stop.' The boat was swinging at an angle of 36°, showing that the bows were wedged in the bottom of the North Sea, while the stern was submerged one minute, and the next above water. It was during these intervals above water that the engines had rushed round so madly, and if the chief engineer had not had the presence of mind to stop them running, the whirling propellers would inevitably have attracted the destroyer. In any case we were in a most delicate situation, for the enemy might sight the exposed stern at any moment and begin putting shells into us.

"Some minutes of horrible tension followed, but we found consolation in the fact that the boat was apparently undamaged. By flooding the tanks we approached a little nearer to a horizontal position. Then we trimmed the ballast till the bows were freed, and after a little while longer the 'Deutschland' was again under control."

Count Forstner, as well as other "U"-boat writers, mention again and again that they had no easy task in sinking unarmed British steamers. The following is the Count's description of his meeting with the steamer "Vosges":—"On the following morning we were to the north of the Scilly Isles. The sea was running high when a large steamer came in sight, evidently making for Cardiff. On turning in her direction she at once made off. As no flag was flying and our inquiry about her nationality remained unanswered, it was clear that we had an Englishman before us. Several warning shots failed to bring her to, so the next shell crashed into her near the bridge. The only answer was the appearance of the English flag, signifying that she refused to surrender."

"On later voyages we had the same experience, the flag was only hoisted after a hit had been scored. All honour to the personal gallantry of these English captains!"

"Steaming in circles the enemy tried several times in vain to ram our boat, but we manœuvred at a respectful distance. Our gunners had no easy task, for the waves dashed right over our boat, and they were often standing up to their necks in the icy waters. Sometimes they were washed overboard and only saved from drowning by the ropes which bound them to the guns. Still the wild chase went on till a shot brought down the British flag, but another was immediately hoisted. A similar fate overtook it, but yet a third time it appeared—this time upside down, no doubt due to the hurry. That flag must have gone down flying, for later we were compelled to leave our quarry in a sinking condition."

"Altogether the chase lasted over four hours without our having been able to inflict a mortal wound, although several gaping holes decorated the vessel's sides, and fire had broken out once or twice. The crew, however, had succeeded in extinguishing the flames. Often the waves would break over the cannon's mouth just as it was being fired, and the shell would go hissing through a mountain of water."

"Now it was high time for us to leave the field, for destroyers were sighted coming up at full steam. Moreover, the brave resistance of the captain and his crew had made a great impression on us. So we left the 'Vosges' to her fate, changed our course, and went in search of other prey."

Count Forstner laments that warning shots were consistently ignored by English vessels, and chronicles with a sense of outrage, that even insignificant trawlers tried to ram his boat. He relates how the captain of the "Ottilie," a steam trawler, in St. George's Channel, yelled to the mate who was parleying with the pirate, "Ram the beggar!" A lucky turn of the rudder, however, saved the "U"-boat from a well-deserved fate. Forstner appears to possess a sense of humour. While cruising in the North Sea they fell in with a neutral

fishing boat, whose captain bemoaned having caught no fish, and apparently mistook the submarine for an English boat. "Our aged fisherman," writes Forstner, "seems to have been very short-sighted, for he mistook our flag for the British, and begged permission to be allowed to try his luck in the neighbouring Scotch waters. I gladly wrote him a permit, and he disappeared towards the Scotch coast. I should have liked to see the face of the English officer, who, no doubt, caught him later on, fishing in Scotch territorial waters with a German permit!"

"We played a concertina 1,500 yards from the enemy," says a German sailor in a letter published in a Munich paper, "but he did not hear it, and neither could we, so great was the noise of the motors. We could not *hear* what was being played, but we saw the tune, as it were, through the player's movements, his face and fingers, and his feet, as they beat time. And we shouted the words of the song with all the strength of our lungs; but yet we did not hear the song. Every sound was drowned by the noise of the engines.

"What do I know about the voyage to the coast of Scotland? Almost nothing! There is no comfort in such a nutshell, for the fore-castle is not a ball-room." The air we breathe is not mountain air, but petroleum, petroleum, and again petroleum.

"The voyage lasted ten days, right along the English coast; now above, now below water. Six hours' work followed by six hours' sleep through ten whole days. There are no commands, for one hears nothing but noise. We are like deaf and dumb men, who hear with their eyes and speak with hands and feet. Hence a gentle kick means, 'Hi! the mate wants you.' There's a devil of a lot of work for the few men, especially when the boat is under water.

"So things went on for days on end, and then came a sensation. One after the other we were allowed a peep through the periscope. It was the sight of my life. There lay an English squadron, like a herd of peaceful lambs, as free from care as if there were no such things as German wolves in armoured clothing. For two hours we remained on outpost duty, and it would have been easy enough to fetch down one of the cruisers to keep us company. But we might not; we were only a patrol. What must our captain have felt—so near to the enemy and yet obliged to leave the torpedo in its tube?"

Probably the man who has attained the greatest popularity in the Fatherland during the war was Captain Otto Weddigen, of "U-9." While in command of "U-9" he sank the "Hawke," "Aboukir," "Cressy," and "Hogue." Some months later he and his crew lost their lives in "U-29." All Germany mourned his death, and quite a number of biographies and poems have been written in his memory. One of the crew has described the sinking of three of the above ships. "We left Heligoland," he writes, "early in the morning of Sunday, September 20th. Two days later, off the coast of Holland, we saw smoke in the distance. After submerging, we steered towards it, and on coming nearer, saw three English armoured cruisers. Without being seen we let the first pass us, and fired a torpedo into the second. There was a loud explosion, and the ship sank in fifteen minutes.



The first cruiser returned to give help, and so we were able to send a torpedo into her, too; she disappeared in three or four minutes.

"Meanwhile the third cruiser came up to render aid, and received our third torpedo. But she would not sink, and so a second was fired, whereupon she turned turtle and vanished. Two Dutch fishing-boats in the vicinity set about the work of rescue, but we steered away, remaining, of course, under water. After a quarter of an hour we came to the surface and made for home. At 11 o'clock we sighted English destroyers chasing us, so we again submerged. On again coming to the surface the enemy had disappeared; a few hours later we were welcomed by German torpedo-boats."

During a recent visit to Switzerland, the present writer discussed the "U"-boat war with various Germans and Swiss. Many of them asserted that German submarines had often been employed to drop spies on the coast of Great Britain, and fetch them off again at a given time and place. They were unable or unwilling to offer any confirmation of the story, but the theory seems to be within the bounds of practicability.

