HMS Dreadnought: The Ship That Sparked an Arms Race

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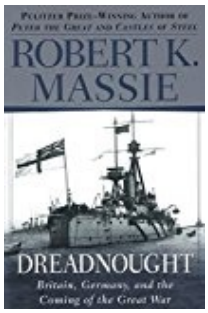

Dreadnought: Britain, Germany, and the Coming of the Great War

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The Most Powerful War Machine on Earth

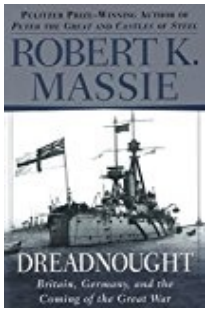
Imagine a weapon which was so powerful that its mere existence rendered all other weapons of its kind obsolete. What would be the response? Catch up or lose your position forever. This was the scramble caused by the HMS Dreadnought. Before World War 1 started there was an arms race between Britain and Germany. The spark for the race was this ship, and the implications frightening in retrospect.

After this ship was launched and fitted out her name would become synonymous with battleships. Even now, historians refer to the pre and post Dreadnought ships...and battleships are known as Dreadnoughts.

The question needs to be asked: Why would the British build a ship that would render not only their rival's ships obsolete, but their own as well?

HMS Devestation - an example of a pre-dreadnought battleship

Dreadnought - radical in design



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The Genesis of a New Class of Warship

The Dreadnought's conception did not come out of thin air. The first five years of the new century were neither calm or sedate. There

was an arms race already in progress, although it was proceeding at a relatively slow pace. Britain still ruled the high seas with her large navy, and until events in 1904-5 the Admiralty were happy to let other navies take the risk of innovation and follow themselves with improved designs.

Britain and Germany had already come into diplomatic conflict over the Boer War in South Africa. The Kaiser sympathised with Boer side, as they were settlers of German descent, was involved in negotiations for peace. At the same time Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Admiral Tippiz both wanted an improved Navy. Between them they managed to convince the German government was in Germany's best interests and so an accelerated building program began. Britain's policy of having twice the amount of ships of the two biggest rival navies meant that they met them ship for ship.

In Britain Admiral John 'Jackie' Fisher had been given the task of improving and updating the British Fleet. There were two basic schools of thought: build fast, smaller ships with long-range guns or larger ships with overwhelming gunpower. The Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 proved to be the final factor in deciding on design.

On the 26/27 May 1905, the Russian Fleet, under the command of Admiral Rozhestvensky, were attempting to travel undetected through the Tsushima Straits between Korea and Japan at night. They were at the end of an epic voyage from the Baltic, where they had been originally posted. Their objective had been to defend Port Arthur, but that changed when they received the news that the port had fallen to the Japanese. Now their objective was Vladivostok. They were sighted, and the fleet was engaged. Almost all the Russian ships were either sunk or scuttled in the engagement with Admiral Toko's Japanese fleet. The decisive element was the use of long-range large guns.

The news of the victory by Japan reached Britain, along with the intelligence about the large guns and the and the difference they made in the battle. It was the deciding factor. Germany was breathing down their necks with new ships, something needed to be done to slow them down. Their fleet needed to be protected against the threat of these new, bigger guns. Plans were ordered for a new all-big gun ship.

Jackie Fisher, in anticipation of this, had already began stockpiling iron.

The HMS Dreadnought at sea. Note the seagulls all around the ship.

The Dreadnought's guns firing

One Year and One Day

A year and a day, so the British claimed was all it took them to build the most heavily weaponed and fastest warship the world had ever seen. The Dreadnought was laid down in the Portsmouth Royal Dockyards on 2nd October 1905, and her engine trial in drydock completed on 3rd October 1906. In fact she was not commissioned until December 1906, but for such a ship she was built exceptionally fast.

Dreadnought had onboard ten 12-inch guns, eclipsing four 12-inch guns, the previous record. The gun turrets were situated higher giving the ship more accurate long-range firepower. The 12-inch guns were just the tip of the iceberg, she also had twenty-four 3-inch guns as well as five torpedo tubes below waterline. Her armoured plates below the waterline were a foot thick

The Dreadnought's design took advantage of all the new developments they could pack into her. She had larger guns, more of them, and thicker armour than her nearest rival. She was faster as well. Most warships had a top speed of 18 knots, Dreadnought could travel at an incredible 21 knots. Not one other ship on the seas could outgun her or outrun her.

The Dreadnought was the first big gun warship to exist. She was the equivalent "Little Boy" the nuclear bomb which destroyed Hiroshima at the end of World War 2, and she had the same effect on the production of new and deadly arms.

The British now had a ship that the world could look on in awe at her power. Dreadnought was a threat, and one other rival navies would scramble to meet.

Dreadnought's forward 12inch guns.

A Magnificent and Deadly Ship, and an Arms Race

A red flag had been waved at Germany with the commissioning of such a deadly ship. Kaiser Wilhelm could not help but respond, and the Germans began a program of ships to rival the British. As well as the construction of new ships he also ordered the widening of the Kiel Canal to accommodate these larger vessels. This canal could be used to move battleships, which were anchored in the Baltic, into the North Sea without having to pass around the Jutland Peninsula, saving time and exposure to enemy fire. This could only be considered a hostile act on Germany's part.

The first German dreadnought-type vessels, which would eventually be known as the Nassau class was laid in 1907, the same year as widening commenced on the Kiel Canal.

Meanwhile in Britain plans were being made to improve on the Dreadnought's design. Over the intervening years between Dreadnought's commissioning and the outbreak of World War 1 there were 12 separate classes of dreadnoughts, each class had between 1 and 4 ships.

Germany, by contrast, only had 5 classes of dreadnoughts averaging at 4 ships per class.

All in all, between 1908 and 1914 military spending increased by 50% in Europe. The construction of the Dreadnought threw spending on navies into a spiral which eventually fed on itself as each side ran to catch up. Each advancement met with its answer as both sides moved closer to the brink of war.

The news of Archduke Ferdinand's death reached Kaiser Wilhelm II just in time for the reopening of the Kiel Canal. The British had sent over a naval contingent for the occasion, which was welcomed by the Kaiser and the Germans. After the news of Ferdinand's death celebrations were halted and the British steamed home. Within two weeks the countries would be at war.

Conclusion

By the time World War 1 commenced HMS Dreadnought was outdated, under-armoured and outgunned by the latest generation of dreadnoughts. She did not see major action, and was being repaired at the time of the Battle of Jutland. Her major feat during the First World War was the ramming and sinking of the German submarine U-29 on March 18, 1915. She made it through the war intact.

The HMS Dreadnought was sold for scrap after the war, and was broken up at Inverkeithing in Scotland, in 1923.

Her role in the build-up to World War 1 cannot be denied. The naval arms race she sparked was similar to the nuclear arms race which came about after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki which ended World War 2. Other countries could not let such a super-threat stand unchallenged, and acquiring the technology to create such a vessel meant that they were able to retain their standing in the world.

Today, if you say the word 'dreadnought' you are talking about something menacing, unstoppable and seemingly invincible. That was what the HMS Dreadnought was, and her reputation has perhaps lived on longer than her memory.