**Merchant Shipping Losses through enemy action, 1803-1815**

Roger Knight 16 October 2020

*Overall British Merchant Ships Totals*

This considerable historical problem has been ignored because it is so complex, and because of the increase of tonnage of British merchant ships during the Napoleonic War, 1803-1815, rendering wartime losses in the minds of British historians an insignificant problem.

**Registered ships** 1803: 21,445 @ 2,238,249 tons

1815: 24, 862 @ 2,681,276 tons

For detailed tonnage of tables by year see Robert K Sutcliffe, *British Expeditionary Warfare and the Defeat of Napoleon, 1793-1815* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2016) Appendix 1.

Merchant ships **built** in British ports, 1803-13: 5982 @ 703,000 tons

For an annual table of merchant shipbuilding, by port, 1786-1813, see Sutcliffe, Appendix 2.

*Variables on Losses*

1 **Multiple enemies.** Merchant ships were taken by Spanish and Dutch privateers as well as French from the beginning of the war. After 1807, with the entry of Denmark/Norway and Russia into the maritime war, and after 1812 the United States, the warships and privateers of Britain’s enemies of Britain became even more numerous.

2 Losses through **winter storms**. Far more shipping casualties occurred because of weather than capture by hostile ship, whether state warship or privateer. In my judgement, there were far more storm casualties in wartime than an average year of peace because war demanded that voyages had to continue throughout the year. Issues with North Atlantic hurricanes and Indian Ocean cyclones also have to be judged.

3 A surprising high incidence of navigational **error** has to be added to the above.

4 **Retaking** prizes. A prize crew once a ship had been taken was by definition small, and many prizes were retaken on their way back to the privateer’s home port. For a detailed look at these complexities for prizes of American ships during the short war against the United States, see Faye M. Kert, *Privateering: Patriots & Profits in the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2015), Appendix; Brian Arthur, *How Britain Won the War of 1812: the Royal Navy’s Blockades of the United States, 1812-1815* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2011) Appendix A, List of ships taken into Halifax, 1812-15.

4 The **definition of a neutral ship** was difficult, especially after the Continental Blockade and the Orders in Council were put in place in 1807. Effectively there was no room for neutral shipping. As a result of these measures all merchant ships carried two sets of papers. In addition, the British relaxed the mercantilist rules so that their convoys offered protection to neutral shipping.

*Extant Lists of British Merchant Ship Losses*

Only one comprehensive, but unreferenced, list of British merchant ship losses exists in C.B. Norman, *The Corsairs of France* (London, 1887). Appendix XIX has an annual table of French privateers captured from 1793 to 1815, including total number of guns and also men. Appendix XXII has a detailed table of English Merchant vessels captured every month by the French from 1793-1815. The total for 1803-1814 is 5314, but a total for every month is recorded. Absolutely no information is given on how these figures have been compiled.

However, as they are the only extant figures, and they do ‘look’ right, they have been accepted. See for instance the classic book by Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power on the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1893) vol. 2, pp. 210-234. Although extremely old, there is a still useful analysis here, particularly on neutral ships. (I remember consulting Mahan in the TCD Library fifty-five years ago, so it should still be there!)

Norman’s figures have been followed by modern historians: N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: a Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2004) pp. 559-60; James Davey, *In Nelson’s Wake: the Navy and the Napoleonic Wars* (London: Yale University Press, 2015) p. 235. For your broad economic analysis, I think that they would suffice.

*Overall French Merchant Shipping Losses*

I know far less about these figures, for as far as I can gauge, there is little French maritime trade, although Silvia Marzagelli’s work on neutral shipping to the United States suggests a different story. Back to neutral shipping again. There were a good many French merchant ships, particularly supporting land warfare, in the north of the Mediterranean, and I have anecdotal evidence, as well as the work of Dan Benjamin, to know that a number of French ships were made prize by the British.

There were, however, a diminishing number of British privateers:

1739-1748: 377

1756-1762: 478

1777-1783: 805

1793-1801: 216

1803-1815: 175

I think after 1807 that they had their greatest success against Danish and American shipping. See David J. Starkey, ‘A Restless Spirit: British Privateering Enterprise, 1739-1815’ in Starkey, E.S. van Eyck van Heslinga and J.A. Moor, *Pirates and Privateers: New Perspectives on the War on Trade in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1997) pp. 126-140. Table 7.5, p. 134.

(Some of this material will be used in the bibliography of my convoy book.)