

International Journal of Naval History

August 2008

Volume 7 Number 2

“To Copenhagen a Fleet” The British Pre-emptive Seizure of the Danish-Norwegian Navy, 1807

Hans Christian Bjerg,

Royal Danish Navy

On 21 October 1807 the citizens of Copenhagen both from the harbour and from the shore along the coast of the Sound watched the departure of a huge fleet of over 150 ships going northward. The citizens gathered were very quiet and shocked. The scenario they observed was a British fleet leaving the capital of the Danish-Norwegian Twin-Monarchy, taking with them as spoils of war the whole Danish-Norwegian Sailing Navy together with all merchant ships which were found in the harbour. That wasn't all. The ships were loaded with all kinds of goods and equipment from the Arsenal and the stores of the Naval Base of Copenhagen. We are talking about the British seizure of the Danish fleet, in the Danish history known as “the British Naval Robbery” or “the Rape of the Navy.” The event is one of the most comprehensive seizures in history and at the same time one of the most striking examples of pre-emptive or preventive warfare.

You will see the verb “to copenhagen ” used when talk is about preventive or pre-emptive attack in warfare. For instance, you may use the verb in connection with the British attack on the French Navy in 1940 and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. To the Germans in the days of Kaiser Wilhelm II, during the efforts to raise and arm a navy in the 1900s, the word “Kopenhagen” meant more than the Danish capital. For the Germans, the mentioned word represented not only a past event but also a present fear, the fear that some day, perhaps on a day as in 1807 off Copenhagen, a British fleet would suddenly appear off Wilhelmshafen or Kiel and without warning attack and carry

off the German warships before the Kaiser's fleet had reached a considerable size. For the Germans, the British pre-emptive attack on the Danish Navy in 1807 and the bombardment of Copenhagen had for a moment uncovered the true and grim features of British sea power. What happened in 1807 could happen again, and seems to be a real fear of the Germans in the formative period of their naval power. The historian Jonathan Steinberg who had dealt with these matters had described the phenomenon as "the Copenhagen Complex."¹ He underlines that the Copenhagen Complex was one of the main reasons why the Germans and Admiral Tirpitz formulated the so called "risk theory." The well-known naval historian A.J.Marder cited Sir Jack Fisher for saying about 1904 that it was really a good thing "to copenhagen the growing German fleet before it became too strong."²

Whether the British attack on Copenhagen in 1807 was an example of pre-emptive or preventive warfare will be discussed later.

In the following, I will try to explain and analyse the background and the course of this significant event in the naval history as well as provide an explanation of the verb "to copenhagen ."

During the Napoleonic Wars from the 1790s the Danish government encouraged by the Danish shipping companies and business concerns had exploited the neutral position of Denmark in order to take cargoes also from belligerent countries. The Danish shipping companies claimed supported by their government that "Free Flag Gives Free Cargo."

The Danish policy was a thorn in the flesh of the British. The Royal Navy demanded to control and to search the neutral merchant ships like the Danish ones, and made so-called visitations. To protect and maintain their declaimed rights, Denmark-Norway entered into a Treaty of Armed Neutrality together with Russia , Prussia , and Sweden in 1800 and began to let their merchant ships sail in convoy escorted by men-of-war. This conduct was possible because of the position and power of Russia . After some troublesome events about British visitations of Danish convoys, which were escorted by frigates, the British decided to break up the Treaty of Armed Neutrality.³

In the spring of 1801 the British government sent a fleet to the Baltic Sea to break up the treaty. This fleet under the command of Admiral Sir Hyde Parker and with Vice

Admiral Horatio Nelson as second-in-command fought with the Danish navy on the 2 April 1801 just outside Copenhagen , on the roads of the harbour. There was no obvious victor of the Battle of Copenhagen, but Denmark was forced to withdraw from the treaty.

The Russian Tsar was assassinated at the same time the Battle of Copenhagen took place, and the new Tsar was interested in coming to an understanding with the British. This fact together with the change in British politics opened the way to the Peace of Amiens in 1802. In spite of that the hostilities began again in 1803, but did not become serious until 1804, when the British government together with Russia , Austria and Sweden formed the so-called 3rd Coalition against Napoleon.

Under the new conditions of war after 1803 the Danish Government continued its previous practice on sea in maritime trade to exploit the neutral position, which was highly profitable for the Danes.

After the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805 Great Britain came close to an undisputed global sea command. The countermove from Napoleon was the “Continental System” inaugurated through the Berlin Decree of 21 November 1806. According to this decree the British Isles were under blockade, and it was prohibited for the countries on the European Continent to trade with the British. The aim of the decree was to strangle Great Britain economically. Denmark and Portugal constituted gaps in this system which were to be closed. Therefore, Napoleon had to take actions against the two countries, and if he succeeded – as a spin off – would reduce the dominance of the British sea power in favour of the French Navy. Portugal was in the same situation as Denmark , neutral and with a considerable navy.⁴

In spite of the British raid against the Baltic Sea and the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801, the Danish-Norwegian Navy was still powerful and a fleet-in-being. This navy might be an important piece of the puzzle of power in Europe in its end phase.

After 1805 the irritation of the British over the Danish convoys and the Danish aggressive attitude on the sea was increasing, and the British government kept an eye on the Danes. The British Prime Minister intended to take action if necessary in the Baltic in order to avoid Denmark giving up its neutrality, going into alliance with Napoleon, or being forced by Napoleon to turn against Great Britain . If the Danish – and the

Portuguese – sailing navy became a part of the naval forces of Napoleon it was considered a problematic situation by the British because of the size of the navies.

Under a patrol in the Baltic Sea a British frigate in December 1806 went aground near the Danish island of Anholt . The frigate sailed afterwards to Copenhagen for repairs. In Copenhagen the British ambassador Garlike asked the captain of the frigate to make a report on naval matters in the Danish capital. This report was sent to Prime Minister Charles Grey, Viscount Howick, in London and gave the impression that the Danish Navy was in good shape and that the Danes worked efficiently with their navy. Howick interpreted this report mistakenly as the Danish government was preparing for war.

In 1806-7 the Danish-Norwegian Navy was the fifth largest in Europe, after Great Britain , Spain , France , and Russia , with about twenty ships-of-the-line and about eighteen frigates.

On 7 January 1807 the British government decided to put obstacles in the way for the neutral trade as a countermove to the Continental System of Napoleon. In an “order of council” the British government declared that all merchant ships which sailed to or from a harbour where the British were excluded would be taken as good prizes of the British. It was a slap in the faces of the neutral countries.

In January 1807 a vice admiral was also designated to command a British squadron bound for the Baltic Sea, but the plans for an attack on Denmark lost their priority for a moment.

In March 1807 the Government of Great Britain changed from Whigs to Tories, and George Canning became minister for foreign affairs. For the moment it seemed that this change would improve the relations between Copenhagen and London .

On 28-29 May Lord Pembroke, a British ambassador, passed Copenhagen on his way to Vienna . He reported directly to Canning: “it was impossible not to perceive that every exertion was made to prepare against any possible attack on Copenhagen from the sea” and “that at least twenty Danish ships of the line were fit to go to sea with all their stores.” These observations are surprising because, according to the sources at that time, there appeared to be only one equipped ship-of-the-line in the harbour of Copenhagen and the Naval Base.

There are two other reports on the status of the fleet in Copenhagen from two British naval officers from the same time period, 2 May and 25 July respectively. Both reports were sent to the British ambassador in Copenhagen but did not reach Canning. Both reports stated that all was calm and peaceful in Copenhagen and at its Naval Base. Apparently, Canning seemed in favour of using Pembroke's letter in the political game. It fit into the British politics that Denmark was preparing to defend its own interests or go into the war on the French side.

Canning received a report dated 7 June, which supported this impression. According to this report, Napoleon planned to let the Spanish troops in Northern Europe attack Schleswig-Holstein the southern part of the Kingdom of Denmark . In exchange for these areas the Danes should be forced to surrender its navy to Napoleon who would use the fleet in undertaking “a desperate endeavour” in form of an invasion of the northern part of Ireland . To day we know that the intelligence was planted deception. It all sounds a little too fantastic, but in the spring of 1807 Canning saw the statements as credible arguments for a pre-emptive war against Denmark .

Russia was defeated by Napoleon's army at the location Friedland on 14 June 1807. The Tsar had to get the best conditions he could to get in negotiations with Napoleon. The two emperors met in several discussions and on 7 July, on a raft by Tilsit, an alliance was settled. The Tsar was forced to joint Napoleon in his war against Great Britain .

We have information that during the negotiations Napoleon considered the possibility of “a maritime league against Great Britain ” and “a unification of the Russian squadrons with those of Sweden and Denmark , being certain of the forces of Spain and Portugal .” It was obvious that Napoleon was interested in closing the two gaps in his Continental System – Denmark-Norway and Portugal – but further agreements were apparently not settled about this subject. In the treaty of Tilsit, readers will not find any statement about an intention to take the Danish fleet in possession in order to make a naval balance to the British naval power. This supposition was previously the most accepted among the historians, that secret intelligence leaked from Tilsit provoked the British pre-emptive attack. But as we have seen, the British were already at that time

before Tilsit deeply involved in the considerations about such an attack. The Treaty of Tilsit was not a cause of the Copenhagen 1807 but more a catalyst.

The British raid in the Baltic Sea and an attack on Copenhagen in order to neutralize the Danish fleet as a fleet-in-being or a factor of power in the hands of Napoleon was in principle decided on a council meeting on 10 July in London. This decision involved in the first place just a conventional naval demonstration off Copenhagen like that in 1801 in order to get the necessary guaranties from the Danes. The wording of the decision was changed on 17 July. There was now talk about “a combined operation employing land as well as naval forces and it spoke explicitly of a military action *to secure possession of the Danish fleet.*” It was the way the British dropped to the conclusion of all the foregoing discussions about the neutralization of the Danish fleet. They cut the Gordian knot! The reason for the operational plan settled now was militarily. After 1801 the sea defence system of Copenhagen was improved. Therefore the British opinion was now that a pure naval attack on the Danish capital would be a question of hazard. The main part of the Danish Army stood in Schleswig-Holstein. It was obvious that Copenhagen together with its encircled fleet had to be taken from the landside.

It has been discussed whether the British attack was pre-emptive or preventive. We are of course talking about two different concepts. One may say that, according to the considerations of the British ministers planning to do something about Denmark, it can be characterized as preventive warfare. In fact, no known plans indicated that Denmark intended to join Napoleon, the enemy of the British. A Danish naval plan from 1806 foresaw that Russia and Sweden were the potential enemies of Denmark, not Great Britain. Denmark at that time no doubt preferred its neutral position, but this position made troubles for the British on the sea as because a Danish Navy in the hands of the enemy could be problematic. In this case, a surprise attack had to be characterized as an example of preventive warfare.

As mentioned above, the sources tell us that the British decisions were based upon conscious misinterpretations chosen for political reasons. The annihilation of the Danish Sea power was seen as *Realpolitik* by the British. Therefore they had to persuade

themselves that the Danes really planned to arm and use their sea power in their own interest – against Great Britain .

The development going on in the beginning of July changed the British plans in the direction of pre-emptive warfare. Rumours and stray intelligence made the British nervous. They had taken their decision and were anxious to come too late. A.T. Mahan was in his anglophile mind convinced that the French were on their way to invade Denmark and the Danes would pass into the hands of Napoleon.⁵ The situation became desperate for the British, and they were forced to act. This justified the attack on Copenhagen and the seizure of the Danish fleet. Seen from this angle, there can be no doubt that the attack was of a pre-emptive character.

Denmark was in a grim dilemma, as previously in its history. During the Napoleonic Wars it had taken so much advantage of the neutral position that it had neglected to obtain an understanding with at least one great power. The country could choose between the devil and the deep blue sea. It was trapped between a sea power and a land power. Had the Danish government accept the British demands, it would have saved the fleet but missed the army in North Germany and Schleswig-Holstein, which would be flooded by Spanish and French troops. Defying the British would mean losing the fleet but saving the army and forcing Denmark into the arms of Napoleon.

The die was cast. On 26 July a British squadron of eighteen ships-of-the line, plus several small vessels, was formed with Admiral Gambier in command. There were 30,000 troops on board. The ships anchored on 2 August north of Cronborg off Elsinore . The next day it passed into the Sound, which was considered as a hostile act by the Danes.

At the same time a British diplomat offered the Danish crown prince, Frederick, who actually was the regent because his father Christian VII was mentally ill. The Danes could choose between an alliance or a deposit its fleet in British harbours as a pledge and security for not joining Napoleon.

The alternative meant war.

The crown prince refused the British ultimatum and went to Copenhagen in order to bring the capital into a defensive condition. On 11 August he left Copenhagen and went to the Army in Northern Germany . The authorities and the commander-in-chief

promised never to surrender the capital. Apparently there were not any precautions taken concerning the fleet in the harbour, which after all was one of the main issues for the British and for the conflict. One of the Danish admirals claimed later that the crown prince had expressed to him that he would rather see the fleet destroyed than in the possession of the enemy.

But no exact order was given, and arriving in Jutland the crown prince regretted the missing decision. He sent a courier to Copenhagen with an order to burn the fleet. However, the messenger was taken by the British before reaching the capital. The order was destroyed, and the British did not in fact get any knowledge of the wording of the order.

On 16 August the British invaded Zealand north of Copenhagen and surrounded the Danish capital from the seaside and from the landside. The troops carried apparatus to throw fire rockets out. The rockets were designed by an Englishman named William Congreve. This weapon was used for the first time just the year before. The purpose of the fire rockets was not military but was intended to be a terror weapon against the citizens of Copenhagen.⁶

After the landing the British practised psychological warfare. They distributed small handbills to the Danes, saying that they came in order to “give security against the further mischiefs which the French meditated through the acquisition of the Danish Navy.” It was no longer possible for Denmark to hold a neutral position. The King of Great Britain was compelled to demand “a temporary deposit of the Danish ships-of-the-line in one of His Majesty’s ports.” When a peace treaty was signed with the French emperor, the British would return the fleet back to Denmark !

In the handbill it was said that the British “come therefore to your shores, inhabitants of Zealand, not as enemies, but in self defence, to prevent those who have so long disturbed the peace of Europe , from compelling the force of your navy to be turned against us.”

This situation was similar to that one in 1940 when the Germans occupied Denmark, and small handbills were dropped from airplanes over Copenhagen, saying that the British planned to invade Denmark, and that the Germans now came and gave Denmark protection against this assault.

Inside the walls of Copenhagen the military leaders discussed violently what they should do with the ships in the harbour. As mentioned above, there did not exist any clear royal order to follow. Should they in any way destroy the fleet – the pride of Denmark and Norway ? In practice destruction was difficult. It was not possible to sink the ships because the depth was so low that the ships would only sink a few metres to the bottom. To burn the whole fleet was very risky because of the danger of setting the city on fire. The Admiralty proposed instead that the rudders of all the ships were taken off and gathered so all of them could be burnt in due time. Under the existing circumstances a flexible solution. The Navy began to follow this proposition. At the same time the Admiralty, without the commander-in-chief's knowledge, began to cut holes under the waterline in the hulls and covered them again. These covers could easily have been moved allowing water to run into the hull and sink the ship.

On 1 September the British presented a last ultimatum to the commander-in-chief of Copenhagen . They demanded that the Danes handed over the ships-of-the line to them as a deposit. But did the British really know what to do if they got the Danish fleet? The British diplomat who at that time negotiated with the Danes wrote in a letter to his wife dated 1 September, referring to the rumours that the Danes plan to destroy their ships, that “if this happens our purpose will be reached in the most effective way, and will solve the difficult problem about what we really are going to do with the ships.” The same opinion is found in a letter from Admiral Gambier sent to London dated 5 September: “If the Danes do not destroy their ships before the town is surrendered, it will require the whole of the force now with me to equip and navigate them to England, but the moment I can spare any of the ships from hence, I shall not fail to fulfil His Majesty’s command.”⁷

The bombardment of Copenhagen began in the afternoon on 2 September. It continued the following days. The damage to the city was horrible, especially because of the fire rockets. After a few days the citizens of Copenhagen had had enough, and the pressure on the commander to surrender increased. On a council of the military authorities of Copenhagen held on 6 September it was decided to surrender the city and deliver the fleet as a deposit to the British.

However, on 3 September the British commanders changed their minds. From now on they would demand the whole fleet – not only the ships-of-the line – delivered

not as a deposit but for good, as a “complete and unconditional possession.” The Danes should never see their pride ships again. The sources do not show light on this change. Did the British commanders twist the original orders from London ?

When the two sides met on 6 September, the Danish representatives were shocked by the change in the demands and a clear squeeze of the conditions of surrender. After these shocking facts the Danish Admiralty demanded to receive from General Peymann, the commander-in-chief of Copenhagen , an order to destroy the fleet one way or another. However, General Peymann had the opinion that the old practice in war was that after having accepted to negotiate for a cease-fire or a surrender you were not allowed to destroy your equipment or change the whole situation substantially. This opinion can of course be discussed, but General Peymann stuck to his principles, and he argued that he never got an order from the crown prince concerning the plan for the fleet placed in Copenhagen . Maybe the general’s decision can be justified. He feared apparently the consequences for the city if the British found the fleet completely destroyed. In fact, he couldn’t know that it was what the British hoped for.

On 7 September 1807 the surrender was signed. General Peymann was later sentenced to death but was reprieved later on. But without adequate instructions he was at a loss and was made scapegoat for the loss of Danish-Norwegian sea power.

The conditions of capitulation said:

The ships and vessels of War of every description, with all the naval stores belonging to His Danish Majesty, shall be delivered into the charge of such persons as may be appointed by the commanders in chief of His Britannic Majesty’s forces, and they are to be put in immediate possession of the Dockyards, and all the buildings and store houses belonging there to.

The British troops did not occupy the city but only the Citadel and the Holmen, the naval base of Copenhagen . In the following weeks, two hundred years ago in these days, the British were occupied with destroying or confiscating ships, naval stores, and all kind of objects in the base and in the harbour. It’s been told that they even took the door handles in the buildings of the naval base. The three ships-of-the-line standing on the slipway were destroyed. The British warfare had very clearly developed into

preventive warfare. The British had no intentions to make use of all the confiscated ships and were never able to do so at that time due to lack of human resources.

In two turns the British sailed away with the Danish fleet, on 16 and 21 October 1807. Sixteen ships-of-the-line, fifteen frigates, and thirty to forty small ships and vessels of different types; in total, seventy ships and vessels. As a supplement, ninety-two merchant ships found in the harbour were filled up with naval stores and were taken to Great Britain together with the naval ships. The Danish sea power was literally torn up with the roots. A ship-of the-line and a few small naval vessels, which were on their station in Norway , did not fall in the hands of the British.

The British raid had forced Denmark not to be neutral anymore, and the country was thrown in the arms of Napoleon against its will. Danish naval crews were sent to the Netherlands to man ships in the French Navy, which tried to dispute the British naval power in the English Channel . During seven years the Danes built a little over 150 small cannon boats with both oars and sail. They specialized in raids on British naval ships which escorted convoys from 1807 to 1814 through the Baltic Approaches.

On their way back to Great Britain with their spoils of war the prepared holes in the Danish ships were discovered. In the worst case the confiscated ships could have sprung leaks in the North Sea and sunk with their crews. In the British press they played indignant at this arrangement which they considered as a criminal and unfair step from the Danish side.

Moreover, few in Great Britain seemed to be happy about the preventive war against the Danes, “the Brothers of the Englishmen,” as Admiral Nelson had mentioned them back in 1801. The attack fell into disrepute in the British Parliament. A contemporary British officer, Captain Charles Paget, noted:

The Danes have done nothing hostile towards us, and surely we cannot be so unprincipled as to attempt the island of Zealand without some fair pretext. . . . Would it be justifiable without any previous hostile act on their part, to take their fleet from them, on the plea of preventing it being a means ultimately of Buonaparte to execute his plan of invasion.⁸

His Majesty the King, George III, who had tried to stop the campaign against Denmark , when hearing about the bombardment and the naval rape, characterized it as “a very immoral act! So immoral, that I will not ask who originated it.”

In Portugal the British tried the same procedure as in Denmark in order to secure the Portuguese fleet to prevent it from being used against them. In contrast to the events in Copenhagen , the Portuguese let the British sail away with their fleet – and got it back after the war!

As mentioned above the British were able to make use of only a few of the Danish ships. A couple of them were used in an attack against the French squadron in the Netherlands , but several of the ships were used as prison ships and hospital ships placed stationary in harbours along England ’s coast.

The British robbery of the Danish-Norwegian Fleet in 1807 is a striking example of preventive warfare. The argumentation for the war was based on doubtful interpretations of reports and intelligence, conscious mistakes, power politics and strategic considerations. The understanding of Tilsit between Napoleon and the Russian Tsar without any facts on the table gave fuel to the opinion that a preventive war was the right decision. And the decision turned to be a pre-emptive one with a long-range prevention as result. The fifth greatest naval power in Europe was annihilated profoundly.

Now we know what the strange verb “to copenhagen ” means. We also know why the historically-aware German naval leadership was concerned at the turn of the Twentieth Century that the British might turn this tactic on them. Clearly, they had a “Copenhagen Complex.”

The bombardment of Copenhagen and the following naval robbery are in many ways remarkable and significant events in European history, in war history, and in naval history. The intentions of this paper have been to give you a brief impression of these events, their background, their course, and their consequences.

1. Jonathan Steinberg, "The Copenhagen Complex," *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 1, No. 3 (1966), pp. 23-46
2. Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow : The Royal Navy in the Fisher Era, 1904-1919*, Vol. 1: *The Road to War 1904-1914* (1961), p.112.
3. Ole Feldbæk , *Denmark and the Armed Neutrality, 1800-1801* (Copenhagen , 1980); and Ole Feldbæk, *The Battle of Copenhagen , 1801* (London , 2002).
4. The political aspects of the subject of this paper are found in the recent published: Thomas Munch-Petersen, *Defying Napoleon: How Britain Bombarded Copenhagen and Seized the Danish Fleet in 1807* (Sutton Publishing, 2007). The paper refers in general to this publication.
5. A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*, Vol. 1-2 (London , 1893) 2:276ff.
6. On the fire rockets of Congreve, see Robert Wilkinson-Latham, *British Artillery on Land and Sea 1790-1820* (Newton Abbot, David & Charles, 1973).
7. (British) National Archives, Kew , WO1/187.
8. Sir A.B. Paget (ed.), *The Paget Papers*, Vol. 1-2 (London , 1896) 2:314.



The Editors
International Journal of Naval History
editors@ijnhonline.org