3.1 Control of the sea as an administrative problem

The strategic concepts of command of the sea and control of the sea have been defined in various ways. Common definitions associate command of the sea with power exercised by concentrated battle fleets deployed to strategically important waters where they limit or eliminate the enemy’s freedom of operation at sea and even on land. Control of the sea is associated with dispersed naval forces protecting important sea lines of communication for shipping and military logistics. In oceanic warfare, the differences are often important, because a battle fleet may fight or blockade the enemy main force in one part of the ocean and control important sea lines of communication in another.

In the Baltic Sea, a rather narrow inland sea with intense maritime commerce and long vulnerable coasts, the difference is less relevant. In major naval wars, the battle fleet and a limited number of cruising vessels could effectively defend one part of the sea if the fleet was placed in a strategically advantageous position, between the enemy base and the part of the sea that should be protected. Fleet commanders on both sides were normally unwilling, or forbidden, to expose their home waters by allowing the enemy fleet to stay between them and their base. This usually created strategic situations in which most available warships were concentrated in the battle fleets and rather few ships were escorting merchantmen and transports. These could sail behind the protective shield created by the battle fleet. In this chapter, the expression “control of the sea lines of communication” will be used to focus the reader’s attention on the importance of the sea for movements of military logistics and commercial trade. The reader must be aware, however, that the chapter concentrates on battle fleet operations, not convoys.

Control or command of the sea usually has been studied as a strategic problem, with questions of how and where naval forces should
be deployed with the best effect and why battles are fought. Battles often are seen as very important for achieving strategic goals, and the term “decisive battle” has an almost mythical importance in traditional battle-oriented analysis of warfare on land and at sea. To achieve control of the sea, however, is also an administrative problem, a question of sending ships to sea in sufficient number and of maintaining them as an operational force as long as necessary. Studies of how it was possible to achieve control of the Baltic Sea must be concentrated on how resources were used in administrative processes rather than on decision-making about strategy. There were few narrow passages, strategic positions, and lines of operation to choose between for achieving control, and strategic decision-making was primarily determined by available resources.

Naval operations required the ability to concentrate and coordinate officers, men, provisions, naval stores, guns, and ships into operational units (fleets), which could be sent to fight at a considerable distance from the base. The administrative task of making one large warship into an efficient and well-provisioned fighting unit was challenging. The task of repeating this in many ships at the same time was often overwhelming. Frequently it failed. Sometimes fleets were delayed so long that they could no longer achieve the operational goal; sometimes they sailed too unprepared to succeed. Permanent organisation creates routines, patterns of behaviour, and professional competence that help to overcome such obstacles. It can also keep resources ready for use whenever required. This explains why rulers and elite groups became increasingly eager to organise navies as permanent organisations.

The most demanding task for a Baltic naval organisation was to send out all available warships in a concentrated and combat-ready battle fleet, deploy it at a strategically important position, and maintain it there from spring to autumn. This posed major problems of timing, as men, ships, provisions, guns, munitions, and various kinds of equipment had to be ready to send to sea at the same time. It also required the administration to organise a steady supply of provisions and water and to continuously find men to replace losses caused by illness. A reserve of masts and spars, sails, cables, and anchors had to be kept to replace damaged and lost equipment. In order to maintain control of the sea, the fleet had to be ready to fight a major battle at any time, and the administration had to be able to repair damages. If the fleet was to support a major amphibious operation, there were