COUNTING UNREST:
PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF UNREST AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO ADMIRALTY PERCEPTION

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By mid-1917 the Board of Admiralty had received a number of worrying reports about unrest amongst the men, as a result of which they launched a number of enquiries to investigate the extent of the problem. The conclusions Their Lordships drew were ambiguous in a number of respects. However, the general consensus they chose to take was one of genuine concern at what they saw as the deeply infectious ‘disease’ of trade unionism, which they believed was being ‘spread’ by hostilities only ratings (HOs) and reservists, and which would, they felt, undermine the very foundations of service discipline. Trade union methods of representation of grievances were the antithesis of those of the Royal Navy, where combination of any kind was illegal. The extent of the Admiralty’s fear should not be overstated; they certainly did not think the fleet was on the verge of disloyalty reminiscent of recent events in, for example, the French army; however, the rhetoric surrounding discussion of this issue, both from the Board and from senior officers afloat, indicates a genuine and substantial concern, which clearly tapped into a pre-war seam of apprehension. This paper examines whether the Board of Admiralty’s fears were borne out by the offences being committed against the Naval Discipline Act (NDA) or King’s Regulations and Admiralty Instructions. If unrest was as prevalent as the Admiralty believed, one would have expected this to be reflected in offences listed in the book of Courts Martial Returns and in the few remaining transcripts of courts martial proceedings.

Statistical Analysis

There are, however, a number of limitations with this system of assessment. Most importantly the Courts Martial Returns represent only a small proportion of the offences punished. The majority of offences committed by ratings were summarily punished—records of which, sadly, do not survive. Officers above the rank of midshipman, of course,
could only be punished by court martial, although in wartime officers could be tried by a Disciplinary Court according to the terms of Article 57A of the Naval Discipline Act which states: ‘Where any officer borne on the books of any of His Majesty’s ships in commission is in time of war alleged to have been guilty of a disciplinary offence, that is to say, a breach of section seventeen, eighteen, nineteen, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-seven, or forty-three of this Act, the officer having power to order such a court-martial may, if he considers that the offence is of such a character as not to necessitate trial by court-martial, order a disciplinary court constituted as hereinafter mentioned.’ Needless to say ‘hereinafter mentioned’ went on for pages.

The offences tried by courts martial represent, in theory at least, the most serious breaches of naval law—either by virtue of the offence itself or of the recalcitrant nature of the offender. Restrictions were placed on the severity of punishment it was possible to award summarily, according to Article 56 of the NDA as amended in 1917. Hence, if it was desirable for the potential punishment to include penal servitude, or imprisonment for a period in excess of three months, the case had to go before a court martial. Despite such restrictions it should be remembered that the death penalty and dismissal with disgrace from the service could, theoretically, be awarded as a summary punishment.

In respect of the ratings who faced court martial, the figures still present a number of difficulties. There is the dilemma of how to treat men facing multiple charges. From the evidence in the Courts Martial Returns we can only speculate as to whether one alleged offence was dependent on another: for example, there is no way of knowing for certain whether the intoxicated condition of the able seaman directly led to his assault on the lieutenant or not; nor is the offence of smuggling liquor aboard automatically linked to a charge of drunkenness. From the surviving records it cannot be determined which offences are linked, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to treat each offence as being independent. This also presents us with problems in the case of categories like ‘sexual offences’: the figures for this offence are skewed in a number of respects. Importantly, charges like sodomy are generally, although not always, brought against two people—thus effectively doubling the numbers of people charged for one incident. Many of the sexual offences listed were committed by a limited number of men. In one case a single officer was charged with ten different sexual offences and it is hard to make adjustments for the propensity for a man to commit multiple cases of certain classes of offence. Most