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# A Brief History of Cruisers, Witnesses of the Colonial Imperialism

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**ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the history of cruisers as a category of warships by examining its relations with the Colonial Empires. The first part of this article discussed the initial definition of cruisers under the 1878 system of classification; the second part discussed the changes added to the cruiser concept during the Wars and under the treaties. The end discussed the end of cruiser and how this change of classification system is linked with the fall of maritime Empires during the Cold War, when they were no longer defensible with cruiser ships. The article proposed a different perspective to view warships as a symbol of the developments of Imperialism and Colonialism, hopefully to encourage a further discussion between traditional colonial studies and military history study.

***Keywords***: *Colonialism, Imperialism, Naval History, Military History, Cruisers*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cruisers are unique warships closely linked with the rise of Colonial Empires during the last decades of the 19th century, and they subsequently died out with the traditional maritime Empires after the two World Wars. Modern missile cruisers still serve in the fleet of the United States, yet in almost all other major operators of surface fleets, cruisers as a category of warships is no longer present: Old cruisers, gun cruisers or missile cruisers, gradually phased out of active service. New plans to design or construct purposefully built cruisers are rare. And perhaps most importantly, newly launched warships baring the traditional duty and role of cruisers are no longer considered cruisers for different reasons. With these obvious facts, it is fair to consider cruisers a dying type of warships, just like the old Empires they used to serve.

To establish a link between the development of cruisers as warships and the developments of maritime needs in defense of the Colonial Empires, one must compare the different stages of these parallel lines of history. First concept and the formalization of cruisers came into existence during the last decades of the 19th century [1], when the Colonialism was rapidly developing into the new Imperialism. Purposefully built cruisers of different sub-classes began to explode until the Great War, after which the naval treaties gave brand new definition of cruisers while the political landscape of the world being reshaped by the rising new powers. Finally, with the Colonial Empires either self-disintegrated or was forcefully being dismantled during or after the war, cruisers became obscured and retired out of service during rough the same time. These three phases saw direct link between the developments of cruisers and their imperial users closer than any other types of warship.

In this article, one would explore this close relation in all three phases of history, discussing the technological, social and institutional advancements that enabled the creation of Empires and cruisers in the first place, as well as the later process in these fields that would see their ends. One will discuss the traditional idea of a cruiser and how the needs and motivations to build such ships changes over the time, as well as why many modern warships are still officially considered cruisers despites their different fleet duty and capacity.

## 2. EARLY CRUISERS IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Different from the unprecedented "Aircraft carriers" or "Submarines" created from nothing; cruising ships had served in the fleet long before the idea of modern cruisers. During the Napoleonic Wars, frigates and corvettes operated with their manoeuvrability and operating radius to function as fleet vanguard or trade escort, fitting into their own roles in the classification system then. For example, until around 1878 to 1882, the Royal Navy used their old rating system to list ships as rated ships, sloops, and smaller vessels. Rated ships composed of the first three rates of ships-of-the-line that could endure the hostile fires in proper battle lines, as well as additional three rates of frigates and corvettes that were not fitting for line duty yet still large enough to be commanded by a Captain. Sloops and similar gun vessels generally would have fewer guns, only one deck and the command of a Commander. Even smaller ships of special purpose or policing duty, like gun brigs, would be commanded by a Lieutenant [1]. The three level system was very clearly marked with the different ranks of the commander of the ship, while the main standards of classification behind being the numbers of guns and decks, which to a certain degree represented

 

the fire power and durability of the ship: Three-deckers with more than half a hundred guns would be used in decisive battles, while the frigates with only one deck should cruiser afar, thus they would be viewed differently accordingly.

These cruising ships were not formalized as a single type of warship for a long time, due to technological limitations but more importantly the practical needs. In terms of technological capacity: Although smaller, more manoeuvrable ships were inherently more capable in cruising comparing with the titanic ships-of-the-line, their speed still largely depended on wind. For the better part of the last half of the 18th century up until the 1840s, sailing frigates of Royal Navy mostly sailed at an average speed of 10 to 11 knots, with a presumably favourable wind. However, when the wind was light, the speed greatly dropped to 5 to 6 knots and became actually lower than large ships with strong wind [2]. In these situations, it was the crews' seamanship to sail in different conditions and the capability to pre-position the fleet into the preferable wind that decided the ability to cruise through oceans, either to break off the pursuits or force an engagement with the enemy. And up until the end of Napoleonic Wars, the struggles around overseas interests were largely carried in these fashion: First, the reliance on wind of the ships-of-the-line means the possibility to use Close Blockades to stop major enemy units into the oceans [3]. Second, the threats uncontainable with Blockades were possible to be delt with smaller ships. Pirates certainly did not possess any capital ships and their numbers significantly decreased with series of anti-piracy campaign [4]. Most smaller navies did not use capital ships as well. While the need for a large fleet of cruising ships remained great for the British and Dutch [5], before the rapid naval innovation since the 1840s, the need to completely merge existing cruising ships into one category and embody them with new designing concept was relatively small.

The key transition into what we now know as cruisers from these cruising frigates was marked with needs unique to their era, the needs for better cruising fleet capable of sailing far and fast. These needs were first stimulated and powered by the rapid expansion of the colonial powers. 19th century saw some of the largest Colonial Empires climbing towards their peak in terms of influence and imperial ambition, benefitting from both the new international geo-political situation and the latest technological developments. On the first part, the devastating Napoleonic Wars were finally completely over in 1815, releasing the tremendous financial burden upon European governments and cleared the seas of Anglo-French struggles again. The Chinese and Japanese market started to become more open in the 1840s and 50s. The continuation of the colonization of African lands and the successful anti-piracy operations in South-Asia contributed greatly as well. The so-called second wave of Industrial Revolution since the 1870s certainly helped the furtherment of requirements for resources and market, both of which can be obtained through imperial expansion, powering up more colonial occupation and a political tension among the colonial Empires. The enormous reach of Empires in 19th century demanded warships to protect Imperial commerce and made it economically possible to build them. For example, by the end of the century, maritime commerce has become one of the major economic departments of the British Empire. British and Canadian shipbuilding industry started to regain their hold of the market with the help of then lowered iron price, resulting in British builders reaching an appalling infiltration rate of 75 per cent of the entire ship production of the world [6].

Ironically, the very technological advancements empowering the Colonial Empires posted the very threat that traditional cruising ships could not deal with: Steam powered metal merchant ships capable of carrying large amount of cargo over long distance played the vital role in linking the otherwise dispersed Empire countries into a more integrated economic entity, but the efforts to protect them were foiled by the steam power metal warships more and more common. Three major naval revolutions occurred during this time: First, the offensive power of warships was amplified by explosive ammunitions, quick-fire guns, better aiming devices and the creation of torpedo, giving smaller ships the possibility to threat even the largest warships. Multi-deck ships-of-the-line were no longer viable and lost their defensive ability. Second, the use of metal armour means any ship could be mounted reasonable amount of defence against old frigates. Third, and most importantly, self-powered warships no longer rely on wind, making them possible to manoeuvre more freely. Major fleet units like ships-of-the-line or later ironclad battleships started to use steam power since 1840s and an active Anglo-French naval race was heated over the Channel and Biscay Bay [7]. This presented unique chances to use more powerful steam ships as raiders and presented unique challenges for Colonial Empires to defend their vital commerce lines. Two ideas were devised: First, headed by the Royal Navy, an enhanced Close Blockade was proposed, and small Ironclads were built to directly confront enemy ships and coastal guns. Yet since 1885, with numerous fleet exercises, it became obvious that the blockade ironclads needed more cruisers to accomplish their job. And in 1888 and 1889 exercises, it was further proven rather decisively that such blockades had become far too dangerous with the possibility of night raids and torpedo ships [8]. Second, if the enemy raiders could not be kept at bay, then power warships must be built to confront them in high seas, powerful warships capable of cruising. Both solutions called for innovations in tactics and designs [9].

The two monumental hulls, HMS Warrior in 1861 and HMS Inconstant in 1866, finished the final push of the concept of modern cruisers. Stimulated by French cruising ships well armoured and armed, HMS Warrior was launched as one of the most powerful warships in British fleet at the time, capable of catching and fighting their foreign counterparts and outgun any older battleships. Yet, despites its superior fire power and defence, it has only one closed gun deck, and thus technically should be considered a frigate. More confusion arrived in 1866 with HMS Inconstant, a ship with one open gun deck, which

made it strictly speaking a corvette, even though the ship was as large and power as any capital ship. These ships were built according to the growing need for fast powerful warships yet did not fit into the existing rating system [10]. A brand-new category started to be talked about to represent these powerful warships manned only by the most advanced Empires, and finally in 1878, the revolutionary 1878 classification system was approved in the admiralty: Capital ships now officially obtained the name Battleships, and all the innovative new designs between them and the small sloops were formalized as the new "Cruisers".

## 3. CRUISERS AND DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE WARS

Cruisers were more defined by the needs to classify these designs than to specifically create to a category for warships with unique features: All-big-gun Battleships carry large calibre cannons. Missile ships carry missile. Torpedo boats use Torpedoes. Similarities are obvious if not too obvious for these types of ships. Yet, cruisers of the same era could have vastly different fire powers and defensibility. The construction of HMS Topaze, then a gun cruiser, was started in 1903, fitting little armour and only 4-inch QF guns onto the hull. HMS Black Prince, whose construction was started in the same year, was nevertheless fitted belt armour, half a dozen mighty 9.2-inch guns as well as numerous 6-inch guns. Light cruiser HMS Cairo commissioned in 1919 weighted only around 4000 tons, battlecruiser HMS Hood commissioned in 1920 weighted ten times more at least. During the Second World War, HMS Dido was designed specifically for air defence, Japanese cruiser Kuma focused on Torpedo capability. In any given time, cruisers tend to be highly differently designed for highly different tasks.

These differences could be contributed to the growing threats faced by the cruiser operators, mainly the Colonial Powers of Europe, America, and East Asia. Under the 1878 system, 3rd class unprotected cruisers would police the colonial waters, but First-Class cruisers would join the Foreign designs in a rushed naval race on cruisers since the 1890s. Russian and French armoured cruisers, armed with battleship styled side armour, posted a noticeable threat to British shipping and it became ardently argued by naval scholars like Marder to build proper cruiser fleet to counter them. Royal Navy launched their own programs to build trade protection cruisers, which in turn stimulated the French, Russian and later Americans to build even larger cruisers to counter the British fleet. Cruisers became so capable and important that they shared more and more fleet duty as well. American strategists quickly acknowledged this possibility, and the Tennessee Class Armoured Cruisers launched in 1906 bared every resemblance to smaller Second-Class battleships: They were armed with 2 Twin Turrets of 10in guns like most Battleships at the time, a terrifying number of 16 secondary 6in guns exceeding many smaller battleships, and ended up with a displacement over 14000 tons, while maintaining the speed of 22 knots like a proper cruiser. Vickers was contracted to build the armoured cruiser Rurik for the Russian Navy in 1905. Rurik ended up with similar level of armaments and defence, operating as capital ships just like other major Battleships in the fleet.

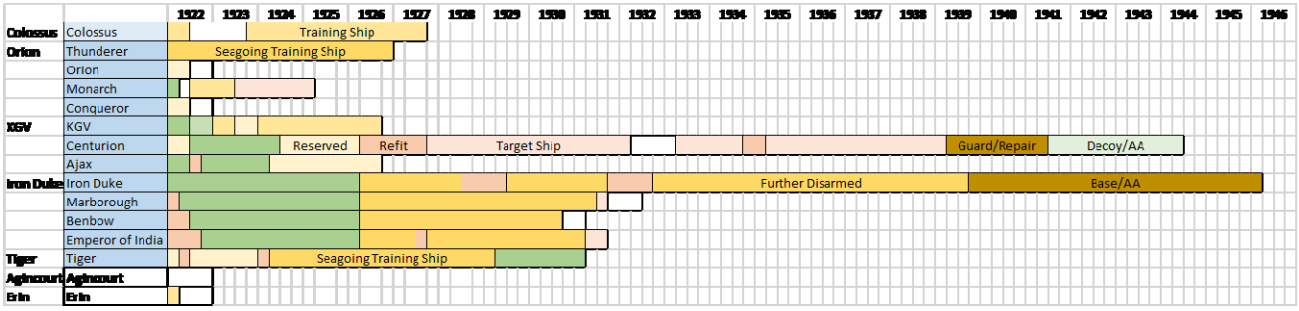


**Figure 1** The rapid phasing out of older battleships during the Interbellum by the Royal Navy

The need for large cruisers to face larger surface units would grow through time as a natural need to outgun the potential threat, particularly when capital ships became far less available during the Interbellum, the picture above shows the lost of two squadrons of battleships to the naval treaties during the 1920s and 1930s, when the building of cruisers peaked.

As early as the Anglo-German Naval Race, even larger battlecruisers were built in large numbers by both the Royal Navy and the Kaiserliche Marines, baring the all-big-gun designs equal to the latest capital ships, the Dreadnoughts. The battlecruisers were so large that although they did bare the name of cruiser in some fashion, they were essentially not in any fashion proper Cruisers, which can be proven in two ways: First, battlecruisers did not operate like cruisers. Although during the Battle of the Falkland Islands on 8th December 1914, Royal Navy battlecruisers were sent to deal with enemy Armoured Cruisers, most of the time these ships would not operate so far away from the Home Isles. Administratively, by the time of the Great War, large cruisers in the Royal Navy were grouped into Cruiser Squadrons, and smaller light armoured cruisers into Light Cruiser Squadrons. battlecruisers, however, were grouped in special Battlecruiser Squadrons and operated with the Dreadnoughts in the Grand Fleet. It was also common to

reinforce these ships with Fast Battleships, like the British 5th Battle Squadron during fleet action on 1st June 1916, later known as Battle of Jutland, or the German 1st Scouting Group in the fleet action on 18th August 1916. Second, upon an examination of the initial concepts of Admiral Fisher that gave birth to these warships, one would find that these ships were not meant to be separated from Dreadnoughts in any way. Fisher argued for the Fusion Ships capable of both cruising imperial waters and concentrate around Home Water when necessary [11], and German battlecruisers were simply designed to operate as faster Battleships to counter the British threat. Cruisers are traditionally considered different from battleships under the original 1878 system; yet the last and largest battlecruiser ever built HMS Hood would be so close to battleships that the debate over her classification lasted until this day [12].

For smaller cruisers, the major threats came from not just the enemy major surface units, but also the enemy smaller cruisers and torpedo crafts. cruisers specifically designed for the screening fleet duty came into being as early as the scout cruisers, which were designed to function as Flotilla leaders for destroyers and help them to screen friendly capital ships. Under the proposal of activists like Admiral Jellicoe, an intermedia idea of Light Armoured Cruiser capable of both trade defence and fleet duty was developed right before the war and saw production until the Interbellum, when major naval conferences redefined the very idea of cruisers [13]. light armoured cruisers, or later light cruisers would go on becoming more and more focused on the fleet screen duty, with many of them ending up highly similar to large destroyers, just like the larger cruisers merging with battleships. During the Second World War, larger Destroyers like the Tribal class with full capability of cruiser-level communication and command were classified only as Destroyers due to their lack of protection and largely to avoid using the limited Destroyer tonnage under naval treaties [14]. Italian Flotilla Leaders of the Capitani Romani Class were even equipped with the cruiser-level protections, making them in every fashion similar to fleet cruisers.

A new threat was added with the invention of warplanes. Old cruisers like the C class started to be converted into anti-aircraft cruisers and purposefully built anti-aircraft cruisers like Dido or Atlanta Class were funded in the American and British fleet as well.

| British and Common wealth | Total | Lost | | to SM/Non-Contact weapon | | to SV/Others | | to A/C | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Town | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| C | 13 | 6 | 0.461538 | 2 | 0.333333 | 1 | 0.166667 | 3 | 0.5 |
| D | 8 | 3 | 0.375 | 2 | 0.666667 | 1 | 0.333333 | 0 | 0 |
| E | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Hawkins | 3 | 1 | 0.333333 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| County | 13 | 3 | 0.230769 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0.333333 | 2 | 0.666667 |
| York | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Leander | 8 | 3 | 0.375 | 1 | 0.333333 | 2 | 0.666667 | 0 | 0 |
| Arethusa | 4 | 2 | 0.5 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Dido | 16 | 5 | 0.3125 | 3 | 0.6 | 1 | 0.2 | 1 | 0.2 |
| Town | 10 | 4 | 0.4 | 1 | 0.25 | 1 | 0.25 | 2 | 0.5 |
| Colony | 11 | 2 | 0.181818 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Swiftsure | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Tiger | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Adventure | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Abdiel | 6 | 3 | 0.5 | 2 | 0.666667 | 1 | 0.333333 | 0 | 0 |
| | 104 | 34 | 0.326923 | 13 | 0.382353 | 11 | 0.323529 | 10 | 0.294118 |

**Figure 2** Losses sustained by British Cruisers during the War, showing a great range of threats faced by the fleet at the time

The picture above shows clearly the multitude of threat faced by the cruisers at the time. The numerous variations of different subtypes are indications of the growing difficulty to defend the oceans.

During the Interwar years, cruisers became once again artificially define by numerous naval treaties: According to the Article XI of the Washington Naval Treaty, any ship larger than 10000 tons became capital ships and thus effectively setting apart traditional cruisers with larger battlecruisers or rapidly dying armoured cruisers. Then according to Article XII, except capital ships, vessels were further restricted with guns smaller than 8.1in [15]. London Naval Treaty further saw the limitation for most cruiser-like ships lower to 6.1in guns with the exception of approved number of units [16]. Germans built the Deutschland Class Panzerschiffe followed by the enormous Admiral Hipper Class, the former specifically designed to outgun the treat-restricted cruisers with fewer but significantly larger 11in cannons.

## 4. THE END OF CRUISERS

By the end of the Second World War, cruisers became something only well-defined when in comparison with other types of warships: Smaller fleet cruisers became similar with the large fleet destroyers and function similar duties as screens. Larger cruisers like battlecruisers ended with the fast battleships and soon phased out with them. The idea of cruisers as a medium sized warship with great cruising capability soon became outdated as even the smallest warships gained the cruising capability, while being significantly cheaper and equally indefensible in front of missile weapons. Cruiser building ended in British and Commonwealth navies, European navies as well as almost every other major navies, with the exception of the Soviet Union and United States.

The experience of the second Great War proved the military weakness of Colonial Empires and the diversity of new subclasses of cruisers reflected the blooming threats well. British fleets were constantly outnumbered in the Mediterranean Seas by the Italian and in the Indian Ocean by the Imperial Japanese Navy. Their conventional forces facing similar difficulty in Europe, North and East Africa and Burma alike. The French and Dutch simply found themselves incapable of defending home territories. British cruisers were forced to develop new designs like anti-aircraft cruisers to counter the carrier-based Japanese planes and land-based German, Italian ones. The impending Japanese threats and potential German surface raiders created the large cruisers like County Class heavy cruisers, initially designed for delaying actions against the Japanese fleet as well as trade protection. With the powerful Italian and Japanese surface fleets, screen cruisers must be obtained as well, forcing the construction of smaller cruisers like Leander and Arethusa classes.

Yet, nearly none of these threats were properly posted by Cruisers, as they lost the traditional raider roles as well. Submarines, rather than Cruiser raiders, forced the revival of slower escorting vessels, which ended up being named Frigates or Corvettes. Planes, rather than Cruisers, gave birth to anti-aircraft ships. When the Red Navy continued their construction of powerful Light Cruisers in the 1950s after the War, the Royal Navy built no new ships to counter these surface raiders rather relied on the Fleet Air Arm to incorporate Blackburn Buccaneer jet planes into their fleet [17]. Cruisers used to be the technologically innovative designs outclassing existing Frigates and Ironclad ships, they became outclassed in terms of technology by the aircrafts, submarines armed with missiles and torpedoes.

The only surviving cruiser branch is the air defence cruisers of the United States Navy, yet it is no longer common practice to consider these type of ships cruisers. The County Class missile cruisers of the Royal Navy in the 1960s were given traditional cruiser names and function as fleet air defence, yet they were considered fleet Destroyers instead of cruisers. Modern Type 055 Missile Destroyers of the Chinese fleet under construction shared similar detection capability and missile defence capability with anti-air Cruisers, yet the Chinese publications continued to refer to them as Destroyers [18]. The difference became a matter of ship size and capability in air defence, rather than a structural difference used to be obvious between a Protected Cruiser and an Ironclad Battleship.

Following the convention of 1878 classification system to inspect more ships, modern Ocean-going Patrol vessels share similarities with traditional 3rd-Class unprotected cruisers in term of duty and armament. Yet these ships are clearly not considered cruisers in any fashion, as they are neither large enough nor well-armed enough for modern conventions. Sloops of the Interbellum and wartime, the trade defence frigates were not cruisers as they did not equal the size and capability of the cruisers then as well, making it even clearer that Cruisers were only an idea when used in comparison. There is simply no need to consider a ship cruiser now other than emphasising its superiority over destroyers, and when no ship is considered a cruiser, the type of ship will die in the history.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Washington Naval Treaty and London Naval Treaty never used to word “Cruiser” directly, rather referred to them as simply units. This is perhaps a clear indication that cruiser had become less well defined at the time to be used as an accurate term like “Capital Ships” or “Aircraft Carriers”. Cruisers were the invention of Colonial Empires at their highest peak to raid and protect their merchant fleets as well as battle fleets, representing the technologies that enabled these Empires into explosive expansion in the first place. They died when newer technological advancements doomed the very same Empires and forced the history to continue. They were the witnesses of an era, an era of violence that certainly was not as beautiful as Victorian maritime fictions. And perhaps it is a good sign that those terrifying warships are less and less seen on the seven seas.

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