

Book Review

Navies of Europe 1815–2002. Lawrence Sondhaus, Longmans, London, 2002. ISBN 0582-50613-1. 424 pages. 48 black & white illustrations, 4 maps. Price £25.

Lawrence Sondhaus's title and subtitle hide an even more ambitious project than they reveal. He deals not only with the military history of the European navies from the end of the Napoleonic War to the present day but also the technical history of the ships and the politics behind the navies. This is by any standards not simply cramming a quart into a pint pot but a full gallon into his moderately sized book. On the whole he succeeds in presenting the full picture in a readable and comprehensive way. Inevitably, much of his treatment is superficial, but he does bring out all the most important points in the story.

After 1815 all the European navies reduced their fleets drastically. Not only were fleets reduced. The rate of construction of such new ships as were built slowed dramatically, though one must remember the common practice throughout the era of wooden shipbuilding of leaving a hull on the ship in frame for years to allow the wood to weather. The introduction of steam, with paddle propulsion and then the screw propeller, is dealt with, then the advent of iron construction. On the political side the disciplining of the pirate beys of North Africa first by the British, and then by the French and other powers, and the operations in Greek and Levantine waters to curb the ambitions of Mehemet Ali, are dealt with. Notice is also taken of the naval operations in the Adriatic and northern Europe in the wake of the revolutions of 1848–49, including the short-lived Schleswig-Holstein navy.

In reviewing the introduction of the armoured ship, Sondhaus rightly relegates the *Monitor* and *Merrimack* to their true position as an interesting side branch off the main evolution of the battleship. That tortuous evolution is described in some detail, though with some confusion between monitors proper, with negligible freeboard and equally negligible seaworthiness, and the early high-freeboard turret ships with full sailing rig and (except for the ill-fated *Captain*) fully able to range the high seas. The battle of Lissa, where a scratch collection of Austrian ships trounced an Italian fleet superior on paper to them by greater determination and stronger leadership gave rise to a belief in the power of the ram as the ultimate ship-destroyer. It is a pity that, in describing the products of the fertile invention of the great Italian designer Benedetto Brin, Sondhaus alleges that *Duilio* and *Dandolo* carried their guns on the centre-line, when the point of these and their British counterparts *Inflexible* and her successors was that their turrets were mounted 'en echelon' to allow theoretical end-on fire in the approach to a ramming attack. The French persistence with the lozenge arrangement of single turrets for the main armament of their battleships up to and beyond the end of the century was similarly due to an obsession with the need for equal all-round fire.

When assessing the fleets of the pre-dreadnought era, reliance on their own classifications by some of the navies compared can lead to problems. For instance, the ships which Italy classed as torpedo cruisers would by British standards be no more than torpedo gunboats, while many of the Spanish protected cruisers were similarly little more than gunboats. Even the Spanish so-called armoured cruisers of the *Infanta Maria Teresa* class destroyed by the US fleet at Santiago were only belted cruisers like the British *Orlandos*. The re-introduction of armoured cruisers proper after the development of improved processes of armour manufacture and the need to counter the medium calibre quick-firing gun is necessarily treated cursorily. The Battle of the Yalu in the Sino-Japanese War is given full value, though the poor performance of the big guns of the Japanese *Matsushima* class cruisers which finally exploded the carrying of such weapons in penny numbers in smaller ships is not mentioned.

With the advent of the *Dreadnought* the pace quickens and the ensuing complication means that the story can only be told in outline. One of the main advantages of the turbines fitted in that ship was that not only were they lighter and more compact, but they could be run efficiently at full power for long periods which would result in breakdowns for reciprocating machinery. In the run-up to the First World War not only the Anglo-German arms race, but also those between Greece and Turkey and between Austria-Hungary and Italy are dealt with.

The events of the war itself are treated at some length. At Jutland it is unfair to blame Evan-Thomas, the 5th Battle Squadron's commander, for the gap which opened between him and Beatty's battlecruisers when the root cause was the poor signalling endemic in the handling of the Battle Cruiser Force. In general, there is undue reliance on totting up of numbers of losses to determine tactical victory or defeat, while

to allege that the German submarine campaign merely 'made life miserable' for Britain is a dangerously misleading understatement.

The various attempts at armament control in the 1920s are treated sympathetically, if understandably cynically as to their value. Again comparisons between fleet strengths are difficult. The big French 'contre-torpilleurs' and the Italian 'esploratori' were equal in fighting power to many other navies' light cruisers, while the French *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg* and the German *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were all intermediate between traditional battlecruisers and the fast battleships which followed them.

When Sondhaus comes to the Second World War his restriction of his treatment to the European navies, with only a very cursory look at the activities of the US Navy, is not serious when dealing with the first years of the war. From December 1942, and in particular with the war in the Pacific, it gives a very unbalanced picture of the events and the policies which drove them. In the post-war period it is a little strange to read, after giving the final completion date of *Jean Bart* as 1949, that *Vanguard* when she was commissioned in 1946 was the last battleship to be completed by an European navy. Otherwise, the reductions and economic constraints of the aftermath of war are well covered. In the Cold War the treatment is dominated by the Soviet navy, again not a little unbalanced by the conscious exclusion except in passing of the US Navy, its only serious rival. There are places where the text disintegrates into a kind of alpha-numeric soup, but this is the fault of NATO nomenclature rather than any quirk of the author, who manages to thread a coherent and readable path through the tangle.

The last chapter brings the story not only right up to date, but even peers into the future to mention the planned British super-carriers to replace the *Invincible* class 'through-deck cruisers', the French *Barracuda* class SSNs to enter service between 2010 and 2020, and even the *Fridtjof Nansen* class frigates to be built in Spain for the Royal Norwegian Navy. In the near present the implosion of the Soviet navy, the *Kursk* disaster, and even the post 9/11 anti-terrorist operations are mentioned.

A comprehensive history of maritime warfare in the 19th and 20th centuries this is not, from its concentration on Europe and its limiting size. But a very readable and generally reliable introduction to the history of the navies of Europe, their ships, their operations and the politics behind them, it is, and can correspondingly be recommended.

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