



The Battle of the Atlantic: How the Allies Won the War by Jonathan Dimpleby.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2016. Pp. xxx, 530. ISBN 978-0-19-049585-5.

Review by Paul W. Doerr, Acadia University (paul.doerr@acadiau.ca).

The word “battle” in this book’s title is misleading, for its subject is a *campaign* that began at the very start of the Second World War (in the west) when a German U-boat (the U-30) sank the passenger ship *SS Athenia* (3 Sept. 1939). The liner went down with the loss of 118 lives (including children), launching a savage war at sea in the North Atlantic. The book closes with the arrival of convoy JW67 at the Kola Inlet, Murmansk (20 May 1945), twelve days after the German surrender. By then, 32,248 members of the British Merchant Navy had lost their lives, along with ca. 27,000 members of the German U-boat service. The book’s principal subjects include horrific convoy battles; the tumultuous relations among the Allied triumvirs Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Joseph Stalin; and errors made on both sides. It concludes with a sober assessment of the reasons for the Allies’ ultimate victory.

Author Jonathan Dimpleby, a popular British broadcaster, writer, and filmmaker, is best known to students of military history for his recent work on the 1942 Battle of El Alamein.¹ With *The Battle of the Atlantic* he has produced a triumph of popular history. Though he breaks no new ground in archival research, he skillfully interweaves personal, strategic, and diplomatic narratives in an elegant and engrossing style of writing.

The book surveys the entirety of the Battle of the Atlantic, but the bulk of it, chapters 1–19, focuses on the lead-up to the dramatic turnaround for the Allies in May 1943. The last two years of the war are covered briefly but adequately in chapters 20–22. The volume is enriched by five maps and many superbly reproduced black-and-white photographs. It is clearly intended for an intelligent general readership.

Dimpleby’s thesis is that the Battle of the Atlantic was crucial for the Allies. Had they not defeated the U-boat threat, D-Day would have been impossible, Britain might have been starved into surrender, and Stalin might have concluded a separate peace with the Third Reich.

The book is replete with dramatic stories skillfully told. Consider this description of U-47, commanded by Capt. Günther Prien,² during its run into Britain’s supposedly secure Scapa Flow anchorage. As First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill had personally inspected the harbor and, though he came away with a sense of unease, expressed confidence in its defenses.

Now [14 Oct. 1939] ..., Churchill’s forebodings were about to be realized. As U-47 got closer to its prey, Prien saw the silhouette of what he thought was a second battleship half-concealed behind the first. Prien chose this vessel—which was in fact an elderly seaplane carrier, the *Pegasus*—as his first target, knowing that the nearer vessel, the *Royal Oak*, was already doomed. There was a hiss and then a click as a torpedo was snapped into its tube and, within moments, sent on its way. Within the next twenty minutes, Prien had crept around to another position which was no more than 1,500 meters from the *Royal Oak*. The first torpedo struck the bows, sending a column of water into the air, with no apparent

1. *Destiny in the Desert: The Road to El Alamein—The Battle That Turned the Tide of World War II* (NY: Pegasus, 2013).

2. Prien disappeared with U-47 in the North Atlantic in March 1941.

effect. A few minutes later, a little before 1.30 a.m. on 14 October, three more torpedoes were on their way. The last of these struck the battleship's hull amidships: "A wall of water shot up towards the sky. It was as if the sea suddenly stood up on end. Loud explosions came one after the other like drumfire in a battle and coalesced into one mighty ear-splitting crash.... Behind this firework display, the sky disappeared entirely." (34)

After a final torpedo struck the ship's magazine, the *Royal Oak* went down with the loss of 833 lives. Its sinking highlighted the astonishing negligence in the Royal Navy's response to the U-boat menace when the war began.

Submarine warfare also took a heavy toll of civilian lives. In his detailed account of the U-48's torpedoing of the *City of Benares* (8 Sept. 1940), Dimbleby notes that its passengers included ninety children being evacuated to safety in North America. Lifeboat 12 spent eight horrific days drifting in the North Atlantic before rescue. Only thirteen children survived the disaster, six from Lifeboat 12.

Dimbleby makes convincing arguments about the mistakes of high-level Allied leaders. Churchill, for instance, remarked that "the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril" (xxiii), but that was not apparent in Britain's conduct of the Battle of the Atlantic under his direction. As the author demonstrates, Churchill was enthralled with the strategic bombing campaign over Germany, meant to crush civilian morale and bring the war to a quick end. Since the prime minister almost automatically favored offensive action over defensive, the British Coastal Command was starved of long-range aircraft until it was almost too late. Churchill's prejudices were encouraged by the abrasive head of Bomber Command, Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who emerges as a particularly unsavory character here. Dimbleby points out that a couple hundred bombers, adapted as long-range patrol aircraft, likely could have won the war against the U-boats in 1942. But Harris stubbornly refused to release the needed aircraft until he was finally overruled in early 1943.

Dimbleby describes, once again, the destruction of Arctic convoy PQ17 in July 1942, a disaster caused by an error in judgment made by the ailing First Sea Lord Admiral Dudley Pound, who prematurely ordered the convoy to disperse—with catastrophic consequences. Some of the convoy's survivors fetched up on the remote Arctic island of Novaya Zemlya after heroic feats of seamanship. The PQ17 fiasco was only one of many frustrations that Stalin experienced regarding the delivery of Lend-Lease material promised by the Western allies. Dimbleby, who sympathizes with the Soviet leader on this issue, describes several occasions when Churchill and Roosevelt misled, if not outright deceived him.

Especially eye-opening was the failure of the US Navy to cope with Operation Drumbeat, the stunningly successful U-boat offensive along the eastern seaboard of the United States in the first half of 1942. Blackouts were not imposed, escort vessels were not provided, and convoys were not organized, despite Roosevelt's express orders. U-boat commanders referred to these months as one of their two "happy times."³ Some four hundred Allied ships and five thousand lives were lost. Dimbleby principally blames Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest King, who had little regard for the British and wanted the American war effort to concentrate on Japan.

The Germans, despite their First World War experience and spectacular U-boat victories in 1940–41, were slow to realize the full potential of submarine warfare. Rear Admiral Karl Dönitz tried mightily to gain more resources for his U-boat arm but without success. A fanatical Nazi, he schemed ruthlessly against his superior, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, whom he eventually replaced, later becoming head of state after the Führer's suicide. As the tides of war turned against his U-boats, Dönitz became

3. The other occurred in the North Atlantic and North Sea in 1940–41.

as delusional as Hitler and sent dozens of submarines on suicidal missions right up to the very end of the war.

Regarding intelligence, Dimbleby doubts that Ultra and Bletchley Park contributed significantly to Allied victory in the Atlantic, if only because they were countered by the Germans' B-Dienst⁴ naval intelligence department. The two opposing services effectively canceled each other out. The Battle of the Atlantic was actually won by the close cooperation of long-range patrol aircraft and convoy escorts, as well as such technical innovations as Leigh lights, hedgehog mortars, and "huff-duff" (high-frequency direction finding) and 10-centimeter radar. The immense productivity of American industry in churning out 2,700 Liberty ships overwhelmed the U-boats.

Although generally very well written, the book is sometimes blemished by overlong passages on, for example, Bomber Harris and his command, and the complexities of the Churchill-Roosevelt relationship. The author's downplaying of the Royal Canadian Navy's part in the Battle of the Atlantic is particularly disappointing.⁵

On balance, however, Jonathan Dimbleby has argued his case for the critical importance of the Battle of the Atlantic persuasively and with skill. Moreover, his book is a pleasure to read. Its vivid descriptions of the terrors endured by seafarers on both sides will stay with readers long after they finish its last page.

4. *Beobachtungsdienst* (observation service).

5. There are also inconsistencies in the citing of U-boat casualties. In one place, we are told "some 27,000 officers and crew—or about 75 per cent of those who went to war [i.e., 36,000] in the Kriegsmarine's U-boats—lost their lives; a higher death rate than that of any of the armed forces on any side of the conflict between 1939 and 1945" (ix); in another that "30,000 young men out of the 38,000 who went to sea at his [Dönitz's] behest—four out of five—perished ..." (45; cf. photo caption 27).