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Tobias R. Philbin, *Battle of Dogger Bank: The First Dreadnought Engagement, January 1915*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xxiii, 187. ISBN 978-0-253-01169-5.

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Writing the naval history of World War I is a thankless task. Between 1905 and 1914, the nations of the world embarked on a frantic arms race, draining their treasuries to build or buy the new dreadnought battleships that were seen as the arbiters of the next war's battles at sea.¹ The British Empire and Imperial Germany led this arms race. Once combat began in August 1914, however, very little happened to these ships. German submarines attacked British merchant shipping, which was important to the outcome of the war, but just two dreadnought battles took place. The expensive fleets swung at anchor for most of the war, and in 1918 almost all their sailors went home to die in their beds.

One of those two encounters—the Battle of Jutland (31 May 1916)—is well known, but the other—Dogger Bank (24 January 1915)—has attracted much less attention. There has been no book in English or German on the battle until this present offering by Tobias Philbin (Univ. of Maryland). Unfortunately, it is not a good book. A typical example of its problems comes in the middle of a long chapter explaining how the battlecruisers that fought at Dogger Bank came to be built. The author quotes a paragraph from a German naval history² describing how much the British knew about German ships and vice-versa during the prewar arms race. Philbin first provides the German original (with three misspellings). Then comes his explanation:

A rough translation is that the British Admiralty knew in advance the characteristics of the *Seydlitz* as revealed in the conviction in open court in Leipzig of a German engineer from a private firm who sold the plans of the *Seydlitz* to the British. Moreover, the German Admiralty also obtained and had in its possession during the war plans of the *Queen Mary*, commenced in 1910, and the super-dreadnought *Orion*, begun in 1912. Thus, [Adm. John] Jellicoe's analysis would have made him double [*sic*] sure of *Seydlitz's* characteristics, and he may well have been right in terms of what he was actually able to know despite the British Admiralty and intelligence services' bureaucratic entropy. The important thing is that both sides knew more than they let on in their post-war apologia [*sic*; read "apologias"] and there was even less excuse for the conflict. (42)

To begin with, there was no "conviction in open court"—the German text says that the trial in Leipzig was held "with the public excluded" (unter Ausschluss der Öffentlichkeit). This does not inspire confidence in Philbin's control of the many German sources he cites. He then gives incorrect construction dates for the battlecruiser HMS *Queen Mary* and the battleship HMS *Orion*. The *Queen Mary* was first laid down in 1911, according to the best source³ (listed in the bibliography), but the book Philbin is quoting gets the date wrong by one year—1910. The *Orion*, on the other hand, was laid down in 1909, as his quoted source indicates. Yet, he somehow manages to change that to 1912 on the same page. These are not trivial slips, since the relative ages of the four large German ships and five large British ships at Dogger Bank were of critical importance, as Philbin mentions: the newer ships were faster, equipped with larger guns, and usually better protected. The German armored cruiser SMS *Blücher*, the only ship sunk, was the oldest and slowest vessel at the battle. Finally, to claim that, because the German and British leaders knew secret details of each other's ships, "there was even less excuse for the conflict" strains credulity. Of course, both sides' admirals ex-

1. See Ian Johnston and Ian Buxton, *The Battleship Builders: Constructing and Arming British Capital Ships* (Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2013), with my review at *MiWSR* 2014-028.

2. Matti E. Mäkelä, *Auf den Spuren der Goeben* (Munich: Bernard und Graefe, 1979).

3. Siegfried Breyer, *Schlachtschiffe und Schlachtkreuzer 1905-1970* (Munich: Lehmann, 1970).

aggerated the strength of their opponent's ships as they sought to convince their governments to increase naval budgets, but implying this was a cause of the war itself is a very long reach indeed.

Battle of Dogger Bank is rife with outright factual errors. Large naval guns used two-part ammunition. First the shell, or projectile, was loaded into the gun, and then the powder, or propellant. Hits on gun turrets often caused powder charges to burst into flame; if the fire spread, the ship could be lost. Both German and British ships at Dogger Bank had turrets that burned out after hits, killing turret crews and endangering the ships. Philbin comments that "The Germans took some corrective action regarding ammunition fires, but they already had two critical advantages: German powder was not in flammable bags or leather cases, but rather in brass cartridges; and, the powder itself, although less powerful than lyddite, was much more stable and tended to burn rather than explode" (155). All of this is correct until the word "lyddite," which should be capitalized, because it was the trade name for a high explosive put *inside* shells, like TNT. Philbin means *cordite*, the British propellant used in both world wars, which was, as he notes, less stable, but hotter-burning, than German propellants.

The most disheartening thing about reading *Battle of Dogger Bank* is not, however, Philbin's errors of fact or judgment. It is his bad writing. In discussing the relationship between Adm. Alfred von Tirpitz, head of the navy, and Wilhelm II, he writes that "The Kaiser had no adult supervision, other than Tirpitz, and that was by no means balanced or assured, and was more absorbed with the two-front land campaign, upon which German's [*sic*; read "Germany's"] survival depended" (50). It is not at all clear what the antecedent of the relative pronoun *that* might be. Further, since Philbin does not establish that the Kaiser was mentally unstable (though many historians have so concluded), why did he need "adult supervision?" And would an admiral be the logical caregiver? Though the thrust of this particular passage is discernible—Tirpitz's navy got short shrift from a Kaiser more interested in land warfare—Philbin's tortured prose consistently obscures his arguments.

Chapters 5 and 6—"Chase and Intercept" and "The Engagement"—describe the battle, but provide no coherent narrative. Philbin jumps from ship to ship and recounts events out of their chronological order. Thus, on page 136, the unfortunate *Blücher* has sunk and her survivors are being rescued by British ships. On the next page, the battle is still underway, and, since it is an hour earlier, other ships are taking hits. In short the reader never gets a clear picture of the course of the fighting.⁴

Readers need to know more about why battlecruisers were built in the first place and how they came to fight at Dogger Bank in 1915. What were leaders at the highest level—kaisers, chancellors, prime ministers—thinking about naval strategy before and during World War I? What were the admirals—Tirpitz, Franz Ritter von Hipper, Jellicoe, David Beatty et al.—intending to do and why did they make the specific tactical choices they did? Philbin sporadically provides bits of intelligent analysis of these issues and he has read the pertinent primary and secondary literature, both German and English. But abundant orthographic, grammatical, and syntactic mistakes, together with errors of fact regarding, for example, ordnance and cryptology overwhelm *Battle of Dogger Bank's* useful qualities.

4. For a concise narrative of the battle, detailing damage to each ship and consequences of the action, using many of same sources Philbin does, see *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Battle of Dogger Bank (1915)."