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Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. viii, 407. ISBN 978-1-107-03690-1.

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The centennial of the First World War has brought forth a plethora of works on the causes and commencement of the conflict, as well as various campaigns and battles. Only a few of these have considered the naval aspect of the war, despite its unquestioned importance to the ultimate Allied victory. Still fewer have attempted a general naval history of the war. With *The Great War at Sea*, however, Lawrence Sondhaus (Univ. of Indianapolis) builds on his earlier overview of the war¹ with a comprehensive review of naval actions during the war, including many less studied campaigns.

The book is more than simply a chronological survey of specific sea battles and naval commanders. Rather, each of its chapters has two goals: “to explain why the naval war mattered in the course of the Great War [and] how [its] naval dimensions ... mattered in the evolution of warfare at sea” (2). The author adds that “the comprehensive approach recognizes the war’s place in naval history as the last in which every country considered a Great Power—eight in this case—possessed truly significant naval power” (3).

Sondhaus has produced an interesting and tightly written exposition based upon existing scholarship rather than his own original research. However, his prior investigation of the Austro-Hungarian and German navies² is put to good use here. He “places greater emphasis on the strategies and operations of the Central Powers, reflecting [his] broader conclusion that at sea, as well as on land, the Great War may be conceptualized as a series of Allied reactions to the actions of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and [his] conviction that understanding their actions is key to understanding the war as a whole” (3).

Chapter 1, “Ambition, Ideology, and Arms Races,” summarizes the causes and consequences both theoretical and strategic, of the massive prewar naval expansion. It is not confined, however, only to the well known Anglo-German naval arms race; it also reviews the expansions of the Austro-Hungarian, French, and Italian fleets.

Chapter 2, “Preparing for War,” includes an excellent discussion of the technological developments important to the war at sea. Wireless telegraphy, for example, figured prominently in the conflict: “The Great War would be the first in which the action hinged on communication technology...” (31).

Chapter 3, “Global Prelude,” concerns worldwide communications in 1914-15, when the Allies—primarily Great Britain’s Royal Navy—drove Imperial Germany’s far-flung naval forces from the seas. It focuses on the well chronicled exploits and ultimate destruction of Vice Admiral Graf von Spee and his fleet in the western Pacific and south Atlantic. Sondhaus properly emphasizes the importance of “sweeping the world’s oceans of German warships and armed auxiliary cruisers” during the first year of the war to its ultimate outcome (91). As he summarizes:

The consequences of this decisive early victory can hardly be overestimated. In addition to allowing the partition of Germany’s Pacific colonies, it facilitated the free movement of troops from India to Africa and to the Middle East, ... and [led] additional millions of men from the British dominions, French colonies, and ultimately the United States to fight on the battlefields of Europe. In general terms, it allowed the Allies free movement of food, fuel, and other materials on a global basis. Finally, the overall failure of German surface raiders led directly to Germany’s decision to use submarines against Allied shipping, arguably the most fateful decision taken by any of the belligerents during the war. (91)

1. *World War I: The Global Revolution* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2011).

2. See *The Naval Policy of Austria-Hungary: Navalism, Industrial Development and the Politics of Dualism, 1867-1918* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue U Pr, 1993), *Preparing for Weltpolitik: German Sea Power before the Tirpitz Era* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1997).

Chapter 4, “European Waters, 1914–15,” considers the early naval actions in the European theater, including the “escape” of Imperial Germany’s SMS *Goeben* and *Breslau* to Turkey, the First Battle of Helgoland Bight, the Battle of Dogger Bank, and actions in the Adriatic. Sondhaus shows that the effect of the “flight” of the *Goeben* and *Breslau* on Turkey’s decision to join the Central Powers has been overstated. Rather, he asserts, the real impact of *Goeben*’s transfer to Turkey was felt in the North Sea, where it might have changed the outcome of some early engagements there, and in the Adriatic, where it could have strengthened Austria-Hungary’s navy.

Chapter 5, “Submarine Warfare, the Great Experiment, 1915,” discusses the initial use of a relatively untried weapon during the first resort to unrestricted submarine warfare in 1915 and its impact on American neutrality. Sondhaus describes the conflict with the United States over Great Britain’s blockade of Germany, as well as early antisubmarine measures, including the use of Q-ships and other subterfuges of questionable legality.

Chapter 8, “Submarine Warfare, the Great Gamble, 1917–18,” analyzes Germany’s fateful decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in early 1917 and the successful Allied responses—“the U-boats of the Great War failed miserably where it mattered most, defying the assumption that they would prevent significant numbers of American soldiers from being shipped to Europe—the key assumption in the German leadership’s rationalization of the renewal of unrestricted submarine warfare.... [T]he great gamble doomed Germany to lose the war” (276–77).

Chapter 6, “Combined Operations, 1915,” recounts the Allies’ failure to force the Dardanelles through naval action alone and the subsequent debacle at Gallipoli in 1915. It compares those disasters with Germany’s failed operations against Russia at Riga in the Baltic Sea that same year. These ineffective attempts at joint land-sea actions provided necessary lessons for future combined operations, such as Germany’s later successful capture of Riga in 1917.

In chapter 7, “The Year of Jutland: Germany’s Fleet Sorties, 1916,” Sondhaus carefully compares the British and German navies’ performance from the standpoint of command and control, tactics, operational coordination of various types of vessels, fire control, and ship design, durability, and performance. Germany’s tactical victory at Jutland was pyrrhic, because, by year’s end, the Royal Navy enjoyed an unassailable superiority in capital ships.

Chapter 9, “War and Revolution, 1917,” examines the toll the long war took on the morale of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian navies in the last two years of naval action—or substantial inaction—in the First World War. Although the mutinies in Germany’s High Seas Fleet and Austria-Hungary’s main fleet were suppressed in 1917, the leaders of the two navies took very different approaches to resolving them. The revolution in Russia, however, removed its navy from the Allied side. The chapter goes on to review Germany’s successful second combined land-sea operation against the Russian navy and Riga, and its implications for future operations.

Chapter 10, “Final Operations,” explains that, by 1918, the navies of the Central Powers were a shadow of their prewar selves, and revolutionary fervor spawned new mutinies that neither Germany nor Austria-Hungary could stop. Yet despite their relative inactivity, especially in the last years of the war, “At sea, as on land, in a losing effort the Central Powers had inflicted more damage and casualties than they had sustained” (350). The British Royal Navy lost more capital ships than the Central Powers and, indeed, all other belligerents combined.

In his conclusion, “Peace and Naval Disarmament,” Sondhaus discusses the naval aspects of the Treaty of Versailles, which led to Imperial Germany’s final act of defiance: the scuttling of its High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow (21 June 1919). He also clarifies the unforeseen and long-lasting effects of the Washington Naval Conference of 1921–22. Economic realities led to an international agreement to reduce the size and number of capital ships that each signatory could build. But the limitations imposed on Japan outraged the proponents of Japanese naval expansion and certainly contributed to that country’s renunciation of all naval restrictions in 1936. The Washington Naval Treaty effectively “left just three true Great Power navies—the British, American, and Japanese—which the outcome of the next world war would reduce to just one, the

American..." (370). Today, the US Navy faces new challenges in the Far East, as China builds its maritime forces and seeks to expand its sphere of influence over the oceans.

The Great War at Sea is a valuable addition to the historiography of the First World War. Lawrence Sondhaus's compelling account of why the war at sea mattered and how naval warfare evolved in the course of the conflict will interest and instruct professional historians and students alike.