

Robert Shenk. *America's Black Sea Fleet: The U.S. Navy Amidst War and Revolution, 1919-1923.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. xviii + 365 pp. ISBN 978-1-61251-053-8.



Reviewed by Mark Karau

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In this unusual work, Robert Shenk tells the story of one of the least-known detachments in the history of the U.S. Navy, the American forces that were sent to Constantinople in the years following the First World War. The United States never declared war on the Ottoman Empire and therefore the country was denied any formal say in the Allied councils that oversaw the dissolution of that old empire; however, President Woodrow Wilson's government was determined to at least "show the flag" in the area. Accordingly the U.S. Navy was ordered to send forces to Constantinople. These forces were commanded by Admiral Mark Bristol and remained on the scene from the time Bristol arrived in January 1919 until the last ships left in October 1923. What Shenk calls "America's Black Sea Fleet" consisted primarily of small craft, ranging from yachts to a few destroyers supplemented by the occasional cruiser. The force saw little action, in the traditional sense of that term, but was very actively involved in the numerous crises that plagued the entire Black Sea

and eastern Mediterranean areas during these tumultuous years.

Shenk's work is not a straightforward narrative history. Though he begins with a chapter detailing the arrival of the American forces in Constantinople and ends it with a chapter relating their departure, the remainder of the work is arranged topically. In his second chapter, he lays out a brief history of the relations between the United States and the Ottoman Empire from the time the first American warship arrived in Constantinople in 1800 until the end of the First World War, concentrating heavily on the role played by American missionaries of various denominations. This chapter also introduces one of the themes of the work, the Turkish treatment of the Armenians and the American reaction, or in the case of Admiral Bristol, the lack of reaction, to that treatment. Admiral Bristol in particular is portrayed as consistently pro-Turk and as an admirer of Mustapha Kemal, the Turkish general who first came to prominence defending the Gallipoli peninsula during the war and would, in these years, become the founder of

the new, secular, Turkish state. Bristol's pro-Turkish stance is emphasized further in the following chapter, which relates the early fighting between the Turkish nationalists and the Greeks who had occupied the port city of Smyrna and the surrounding area. In ensuing chapters, Shenk goes on to examine the influx of White Russian refugees fleeing the Russian Civil War and their impact on life in Constantinople; the brutal slaughter of Greeks and Armenians by Turkish forces in the northeastern region of Turkey known as the Pontus and the efforts of American missionaries and American naval personnel (without the support of Admiral Bristol) to, unsuccessfully, halt the killing; the massive famine in southern Russia and the efforts of the American forces to both provide relief and evacuate the starving; the efforts of American naval personnel to rescue civilians from Smyrna after nationalist Turkish forces recaptured the city from the Greeks and set fire to its non-Turkish sectors; and, lastly, the efforts of American forces to provide relief to the ethnic minorities, mainly Greeks and Armenians, who were trying to flee the country as the Turkish forces closed in on Constantinople. In each of these areas what emerges from Shenk's work is a portrait of individual men, and in the case of some missionaries, women, who at times went to enormous lengths to provide what little assistance they could as individuals to those who were suffering while the overall American command generally preferred not to get involved.

While most of the work revolves around the atrocities and the war, Shenk does not dwell completely on political and military events; he also presents chapters on what life was like for the American sailors in this exotic location. One chapter details the average shipboard life of men and officers. Two chapters concentrate on the means of recreation available to these men, with one of these devoted to the night life of Constantinople while the other examines more prosaic and athletic pursuits, such as swimming and yachting. He draws particular attention to the prevalence of

prostitution in the former Ottoman capital and the concomitant concerns over American seamen contracting various venereal diseases.

Though the book is marketed as a naval history, what Shenk has really given us is a study of the tumultuous conditions in post-World War One Turkey. The American naval forces play a very small role in the work. What we see is the struggle for power in Turkey and the atrocities that were committed during that struggle as they were filtered through the eyes of the American sailors, missionaries, diplomats, and politicians on the scene. The strongest portions of the work are those that deal with the massacres of the Greek and Armenian population and the efforts of American missionaries and sailors to save who they could. In the end, the book is the story of the actions taken by American relief workers as reported by the American naval personnel on the scene.

Shenk, though not a naval historian by training, gives us an extremely well-researched and engagingly written volume. The author makes excellent use of many primary sources, in particular the Mark Bristol papers, which are held in the Library of Congress, and letters written by many of the officers and men of the fleet. The work also contains several excellent maps that are essential to Shenk's narrative. This reviewer has only one criticism; the book would have benefited from a stronger conclusion that brought the various strands of Shenk's story together and showed how the events he discusses affected one another. Without that conclusion we are left with an interesting micro-history of these particular sailors and officers, but this reader at least was left wondering what the overall significance was of this American presence in Turkey. I recommend the work as it provides some excellent insights into the conditions in Asia Minor after WWI. It is, however, not a traditional naval history.

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