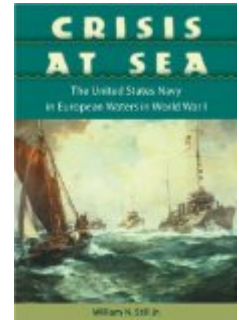


**William N. Still, Jr..** *Crisis at Sea: The United States Navy in European Waters in World War I.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. xxviii + 742 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2987-0.



**Reviewed by** Michael Besch

**Published on** H-Maritime (June, 2007)

To say that the new book by William Still, Jr., *Crisis at Sea: The United States Navy in European Waters*, is a "comprehensive" study would constitute the barest of understatements. This monumental work represents many years of meticulous research, analysis, and synthesis of documents which until now have received scant study. U.S. naval activities in "The Great War" can be categorized in two main sectors: the domestic theater with its focus on training and technological development and the European theater with its focus on operations and logistics. It is this latter theater that forms the basis for study in *Crisis at Sea*.

Still goes to great length to set the stage for U.S. naval involvement in the war, devoting much of the early part of this book to that end. In the first chapter, and indeed in the following three, much attention is given to creating character images of the major players in the events that follow. Where a typical author might include one or two vignettes to describe an individual personality, Still often provides two or more pages. The result is that one acquires a much more complete, a more richly wrought, picture of the main actors in

this play. In performing this task, Still scrupulously avoids interjecting his own biases or feelings toward the individuals involved. This has been a common flaw in other studies of the period.

World War I was not characterized by the grand sea battles and dramatic amphibious operations that were common in and form the basis for the extensive literature surrounding World War II. Given that there are few major battles to depict, what does one write about in a 700-plus-page "history of operations?" The author devotes a great deal of space to analyzing the politics and climate of international relations, providing a rich and robust context for the events that follow. His presentations of the European officers and public officials are particularly insightful and unique, allowing a first-person perspective into matters of naval strategy and maritime policy. In this process, Britain comes off in a most positive light, with France slightly less so. Italy suffers in comparison, and Russian relations are portrayed quite negatively. Within this milieu, some of the most fascinating and engaging passages are those that describe little-known operations--the operations

in the Adriatic and the conflicts in northern Russian waters are two good examples. If naval operations in World War I are notoriously understudied, the fact that this volume pays special attention to these historical footnotes shows just how far-reaching this treatment really is.

The book is organized into twenty chapters, each of which could be considered and read independently of one another. While there is some attempt at chronology in the organization, it is primarily a topical approach that Still employs, and one simply cannot digest this book as one would a Patrick O'Brien novel. One is best off reading a chapter at a time, and then reflecting on what has been written. The first four chapters set the stage and describe the organizational structure under which the navy operated in World War I, and as mentioned previously, Still herein introduces almost all of the major characters. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the facilities and introduce the lesser players in, first, Britain, followed by France, the Mediterranean, and the Azores. It is here that matters get confusing and somewhat repetitious; a book of this scope and dimension surely deserves a more meticulous editor. Chapters 7 and 8 discuss logistics and cover much the same ground; indeed they could largely be coalesced into one treatment. Then chapters 9, 10, and 11 treat various aspects of personnel, including training, social life, and relations with the locals; again, there is far too much overlap in these vignettes. Chapter 12, probably the best conceived and best written of all the chapters, details the various ship types and the weapons in use during the war. Chapters 13, 14, and 15 tell the story of convoy operations, while chapters 16 and 17 describe operations unique to the North Sea. Chapter 18 is devoted to anti-submarine warfare, and chapter 19 tells the story of events in the Mediterranean. Chapter 20 serves to tie the whole mass together and to provide something of a postscript.

Given the blend of topic and chronology, there is a bit of redundancy. One is reading when

all of a sudden a feeling of *déjà vu* enters one's thoughts. Characters are introduced, then, in a different chapter, they are reintroduced; ships are described and then described again; the components of various fleets and flotillas are enumerated and then enumerated again. There are even some regrettable instances where passages are repeated nearly verbatim. This is easily understandable, however, and is, I believe, a function of how the archival sources that Still so expertly mined were compiled in this era. Still has made extensive and excellent use of various National Archive record groups--notably RG 45. Having worked with these same sources myself, I can attest that these records contain a plethora of reports, many of which duplicate material introduced elsewhere. Indeed, when doing this type of research, it is not uncommon to encounter the same report in two or more different sources, often written by different authors! Are there other issues? Sadly. The index is in error in a number of instances and is incomplete in others. There are also the inevitable typos in the body of the text, but none worthy of note.

Nonetheless, these are extremely minor quibbles in what is probably the best book on the U.S. Navy in World War I that has been written thus far. The sheer extent of Still's research alone is a monumental achievement and can serve as a springboard for other scholars of the subject. Sources are largely primary in nature with the collections at the National Archives, the Naval Historical Center, and the Library of Congress comprising the bulk of the material. What separates Still's research, though, is his extensive use of European sources, most of which have not been sounded by other authors in the field of U.S. Naval history. Few authors are as thorough and detailed as Still--the endnotes alone constitute 148 of the 741 total pages of the volume, with the bibliography comprising another 50 pages! Several pages of photographs--some rare and unique--

along with some excellent charts add depth and meaning to the text.

It is rewarding to see growing attention being paid to the long-ignored history of the U.S. Navy in World War I. A small but growing list of well-researched works (smaller works like Jerry Jones' history of the battleship in World War I and Michael Besch's history of training in the same period and more comprehensive works such as Paul Halpern's broad history of the naval activities in the war being three such examples) is now joined by the most comprehensive, most thoroughly researched, most authoritative work of them all.[1] This is truly an outstanding achievement and William Still Jr. is to be congratulated on his tremendous accomplishment.

Note

[1]. Jerry Jones, *U.S. Battleship Operations in World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998); Michael Besch, *A Navy Second to None: The History of U.S. Naval Training in World War I* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001); Paul Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-maritime>

**Citation:** Michael Besch. Review of Still, William N., Jr. *Crisis at Sea: The United States Navy in European Waters in World War I*. H-Maritime, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13263>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.