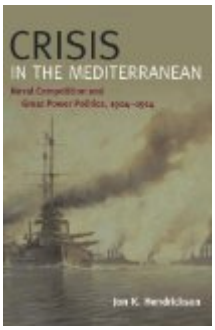
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jon K. Hendrickson. *Crisis in the Mediterranean: Naval Competition and Great Power Politics, 1904-1914.* New Perspectives on Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology Series. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2014. 234 pp. $54.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61251-475-8.

Reviewed by Joseph Moretz

Published on H-War (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The backdrop of naval rivalry as a precursor to the First World War is a story that has been related often, but invariably the story speaks to the Anglo-German contest centered on the North Sea and revolving around the competition in capital ships. Rather less has been written of the Mediterranean theater and of the competing naval policies of Britain, France, Italy, and Austria-Hungary. This imbalance is the focus of Jon K. Hendrickson's *Crisis in the Mediterranean*, which traces the ebb and flow of rivalry, construction, and planning in the decade before the onset of war among the naval powers of the Middle Sea.

The drama is anchored in the diplomatic maneuvering of the parties concerned who aimed to maximize their security interests while also pursuing policies, such as territorial acquisition, that would only work to the perceived disadvantage of others. The book highlights that matters of prestige and economic development—imperialism by its current formulation—exerted no small influence in the events leading to war. Navies and naval rivalry played their part, but only on the periphery for the security interests of all concerned were always more focused on the military balance of power than on the naval.

This was true for all except Great Britain, that is. Being an island nation and an industrial stalwart, but having an insufficient agricultural base while holding the greatest empire secured by the Royal Navy, Britain had a maritime problem that was ever present. Yet the maritime problem did not stand in isolation; trade, finance, and geography were critical underpinnings to the strength of Britain and, in turn, its navy. Tthe lack of British heavy ships in the Mediterranean was not the weakness Hendrickson believes for holding Gibraltar, Malta, and Cyprus, while occupying Egypt, the Sudan, and the Horn of Africa made the naval strength of others as if gossamer. In war, no less than in the law, possession is nine-tenths of the equation. Still, Great Britain could not be complacent with Germany, already the premier continental military power, threatening to do as much

again in the naval sphere in the waters of the North Sea.

The British response was to double down on maintaining the primacy of the Royal Navy in home waters through a combination of new construction of the most advanced battleships and deft diplomacy as recounted by the author. Yet some held that the rebalancing of fleets between home and distant stations exposed British interests to undue risks. This was the view of the Foreign Office and it was shared by the War Office too, for it spelled a greater commitment of military forces to isolated garrisons, such as Malta and Cyprus, until the navy could offer relief at a moment of crisis.

A treaty with Japan and reconciliation with Russia minimized the problems in Asia while rapprochement with France allowed much the same in the Mediterranean. In the background stood the fear of invasion—a perennial issue in British strategic debate—and the parallel clamor by Lord Roberts for conscription, and the raising of a large standing army was another means to meet the threat (something the author fails to discuss). The Committee of Imperial Defence elected not to pursue that option proving that building battleships was more palatable than conscripting constituents. The irony is that in accepting the strategy of the War Office, Britain would require conscription. In the end, the rivalry posited by Hendrickson was between nations, not navies; it is insufficient to consider their collective responses only along such lines.

The author might have considered in greater detail the events during the Turco-Italian War of 1911-12, which presaged controversies arising in the world war, including contraband control, belligerent rights, and the viability of opposed landings. Again, since aircraft and airships were to exert major influences in the near future, Hendrickson might have extended his analysis of relative fleet strengths to include the place and status of each in the principals surveyed during the prewar period. Unfortunately, the analysis that is accomplished never advances beyond a calculation of basic fighting value for the classes of ships discussed. The presumed tactics of the respective Mediterranean fleets are never discussed. This is unfortunate for this was a period rich in tactical theory and discourse, but the reader is left no wiser.

The real crisis in the Mediterranean littoral was the nationalism of aspirant peoples. In Italy, this led to unification and expansion with that expansion soon directed at the expense of the Ottoman Empire and the Dual Monarchy. The make-up of greater Turkey and Austria-Hungary, based on multiethnic populations, went against the grain of this emerging nationalism. Unrest and decline in both became endemic and the geographic proximity of others made the issues arising more than local concerns. This story is largely absent and so too are the reasons why Italy initially opted for neutrality when war arose in 1914. Clearly, naval competitions and rivalries operated in a broader context. Still, naval competition and rivalry had their part to play. Building its fleet to face, at differing times, threats posed by France and Austria, Italy used it with effect against the Ottomans. There was irony in this too.

Hendrickson would have been better served to consider at length more recent scholarship on the dreadnought revolution and the place of economic warfare in British admiralty planning. The late Arthur Marder remains a very creditable historian, but our knowledge has advanced substantially from the picture painted fifty plus years ago. [1] Thus, ***Crisis in the Mediterranean*** offers an introduction to the naval competition of the second tier maritime powers in the pre-1914 period, but the view taken remains narrow. Based on archival research and secondary academic literature, the work offers a succinct summary of Mediterranean naval affairs on the cusp of the First World War. Those desiring to know something of the period and its problems will benefit from its reading, but

those already grounded in the period and its problems will wish that a broader tapestry had been presented.

Note

[1]. Arthur J. Marder, ***From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow***, 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1961-70).

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

Citation: Joseph Moretz. Review of Hendrickson, Jon K. ***Crisis in the Mediterranean: Naval Competition and Great Power Politics, 1904-1914.*** H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42341


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