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Lawrence Sondhaus. *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 417 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-03690-1.

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"There seems to be something wrong with our bloody ships today," Vice Admiral David Beatty famously stated while on board of the battlecruiser *Lion* during the opening stages of the massive First World War battle of Jutland on May 31, 1916 (p. 204). This summation of the pounding the British Grand Fleet took that day from Vice Admiral Reinhard Scheer's German Hochseeflotte could, metaphorically, serve as an epitaph for a number of theories of First World War naval warfare that author and educator Lawrence Sondhaus ably torpedoes in his eminently readable new account, *The Great War at Sea* from Cambridge University Press. Though replete with some technical jargon and details—for instance recounting the range finding and targeting controversy in the pre-First World War British fleet that pitted competing systems such as Arthur Pollen's Argo Clocks against Dreyer Tables, or the birthing pangs of wireless communications—Sondhaus's book is clearly meant for the general reader, who will never feel lost at sea while perusing this tome. Of importance is also the amount of primary and secondary source material included from German sources that deals specifically with matters relating to Central Powers issues and policies, a welcome addition to any Anglophone publication that historically tends to privilege British and allied sources.

The author chooses a chronological approach, outlining the most germane Alliance and Entente naval policies that preceded the catastrophe of June-August 1914, prominent among them the rise of the Mahanian thought that influenced the German-British naval arms race and the quest for a grand decisive battle to be fought by large fleets of heavily armed and armored capital ships. After his discussion of the major encounter of the war, the aforementioned Battle of Jutland (or of Skagerrak in German sources), which failed to bring such a decisive resolution and failed to break the British blockade that was slowly starving the Second Reich, Sondhaus proceeds to outline Germany's attempts to rectify their inferiority in large surface vessels vis-à-vis the British Empire by utilizing the submarine (a vessel originally de-

signed for coastal home-defense duties) as an offensive weapon in the commerce raiding category. This argument, of course, finds its climax in the first and second bout of unrestricted submarine warfare that in April of 1917 brought the United States into the war as an associated power.

It is here that the author's neo-Mahanian slant comes into sharper focus. Sondhaus consistently argues that although the naval campaigns of World War One might pale next to the titanic scope and nature of the ground struggle, and caused less than a percent of the hecatombs of human lives consumed by that conflict, nevertheless they had a direct and decisive effect on shaping both war strategies and war resolution. The success of 1914-15 efforts to limit Central Power surface fleets basically to their bases allowed for the free seaborne transferal of war materials and colonial troops (and eventually the American army) over controlled ship lanes that vastly upgraded allied war capabilities that contributed to their eventual victory. Even the apparent anticlimactic and anti-Mahanian event of Jutland, where the long sought after grand clash of dreadnaughts at first seems to have failed to bring about a decisive resolution (here Sondhaus is among the minority of historians who treat the battle as at least a tactical German victory), in actuality is quite decisive: the German failure to destroy the Grand Fleet and its blockade necessitated the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare whose own eventual strategic failure to knock England out of the war (though Sondhaus points that it was more successful than Germany's similar efforts in WWII) had the decisive effect of bringing the United States into the war, thus guaranteeing allied victory. This is sort of negative Mahanian tautology at its best; by its failure to decisively win the war at sea through their dreadnaughts and submarines, Germany therefore decisively lost the war.

In some instances, Sondhaus's conclusions might seem just a tad overly eager, for instance, when he places the blame for the mutinies that eventually rocked the Russian, German, and KuK navies toward the end of the war on the inactions of their surface fleets following the inconclusive Battle of Jutland and the emergence of submarine warfare as the premier method of Central Powers naval campaigning. The great capital ship dreadnaughts of the surface fleets, at anchor in Wilhelmshaven, Kronstadt, Helsinki, Pola, or Cattaro, their best and brightest officers and sailors recruited for submarine duties, their food rations cut and their crews suffering from officer-sailor class antagonism combined with dreary boredom of inaction, became hotbeds of revolutionary activity that eventually translated into active and armed outbursts that at least in the case of the Russian fleet at Kronstadt led to the direct toppling of the government. To argue between sufficient and necessary causes of events here would be pointless; suffice it so say that the end-of-war mutinies and revolutions were inspired by mechanisms whose reasoning was perhaps far more complex than the one listed above. If the thrust of the argument were to be followed logically then it is the Japanese navy, which, after its brief and almost bloodless klepto-campaign of seizing German Pacific holdings in late 1914 and early 1915, should have been the first to raise the Red flag for a lack of having anything to do.

Likewise, those hoping for an exciting tactical narrative of the war's great sea battles will have their hopes dashed against the rocks and sunk. Sondhaus's main thrust is strategic, and his battle accounts are reduced to rather dry and yeoman-like "ship X opened fire at ship Y from a distance of Z meters at A time; at B time ship Y sunk, having been hit by C number of shells; there were D survivors." Though at first this critique might seem like a hit below the waterline, it actually isn't a bad thing, as through it the author makes it abundantly clear that he is not competing with the already extant great descriptions of these seaborne struggles, and instead concentrates his exegesis on grand strategy. In that sense, ***The***

Great War at Sea is a “Damn the torpedoes! Full steam-ahead!” work that reminds the reader that much credit for Allied victory in World War I must go to that element that has often been left entirely submerged in accounts that favor and privilege the campaigns on land.