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James Davey's engaging and provocative naval history of Britain during the 1790s invites readers to put politics at the center of understanding what happened during that decade in and through the Royal Navy, and why it matters. His narrative highlights the political activities of sailors, which became a serious problem for the British state. These developments, and the navy's suboptimal performance during most of the war with revolutionary France, prompted public reevaluations of the senior service's standing as bulwark of the nation's liberty and prosperity. By the end of the war, the engagement of many sailors with radical political concepts and mass rejection of established hierarchies had transformed ships into "political space" (p. 307). Nonetheless, however much the Royal Navy's workforce imbibed the decade's progressivist zeitgeist, which Davey demonstrates persuasively, neither the navy nor its sailors promoted anything close to the kind of constitutional transformation that the New Model Army pulled off several times a century and a half earlier. This feature of Britain's "Age of Revolutions" helps explain why the kingdom did not have one.

Davey makes his case for the navy's participation in the revolutionary age over eight chapters that analyze social-administrative topics, public discourse about events within or involving the navy, and its operations. The chapter on manning tackles the significance of naval impressment, which Davey argues came to be viewed by many sailors and elements of the public as a form of state repression. Hostility to impressment and to press gangs, sometimes on a large scale as at Whitby in early 1793, is figured as political protest, that is, as opposition to the excesses of undemocratic government and overweening elites. Protest and resistance are likewise master concepts in Davey's analysis of shipboard mutinies. Sailors increasingly deployed the language of rights to express—through petitions, desertion, and seizing of ships—their grievances with mis-
treatment by officers, the Articles of War, and poor compensation. Reasoning by analogy, Davey puts these shipboard words and actions in the same interpretative framework as the agitations of political radicals on land. Just as individuals ashore called for parliamentary reform, seamen "took matters into their own hands" by appointing delegates to represent their concerns. Nonetheless, Davey does concede that the number of sailors "demanding change" in fact did "not always represent the entire workforce" (p. 129).

The sixth chapter contains the crux of the narrative: the great mutinies of spring 1797. Davey insists that the outbreaks of mutiny off Spithead, the Nore, and Yarmouth, which centered on the not-unreasonable demand for the first raise in able-seamen's pay since 1653, were "fundamentally political," and "only make sense when considered as part of Britain's Age of Revolutions" (p. 200). The evidence presented for these claims is the fact that sailors appointed delegates—a term with democratic associations—to represent their demands, the subversion of traditional norms of obedience to superiors, and calls for courts martial run by seamen themselves (p. 227). On occasion, the 1797 mutineers relied on the "incendiary language" of liberty and oppression (p. 222). The most "intense program" of protest in the history of the Royal Navy was followed by a governmental reaction that Davey again insists "can only be understood in the context of a state growing in repressive power" (p. 202). Davey's attempt to make the sailors' work stoppage in 1797 revolution-adjacent is attractive, but when stacked up against what happened at Kiel in November 1918, it is not a little underwhelming.

However, students of naval history should be delighted at Davey's deft retelling of naval operations over four chapters. His accounts of action are compelling and should serve as models for how a well-crafted narrative can truly represent past reality. He shows convincingly why, with a few notable exceptions, the Royal Navy was not the game changer late eighteenth-century navalists believed it always would be. Another commendable feature of the book is Davey's weaving together of the outcome of naval operations and the different ways the navy featured in debates over foreign policy. The navy's equivocal performance against French attempts to land troops on the British mainland was exploited by the government to encourage enlistment in the militia, and popular loyalty. In light of the 1797 mutiny and declining public confidence in the loyalty of sailors, naval leaders and politicians promoted vigorously the bravery of seaman Jack Crawford at Camperdown battle. Most notably, Horatio Nelson became the focus of febrile propaganda that intimidated the disloyal at home by showcasing the navy's ability to crush foreign enemies.

Overall, Tempest is an excellent example of naval history with the politics put back. The book opens with its author acknowledging his sympathy for those striving to improve their lot in life, both in the 2020s and the "equally tumultuous" revolutionary eighteenth-century decade (p. xi). An avowed rejection of neutrality need not raise serious concerns about the quality of such a book's argument or its cleaving to what in fact happened. Objectivity is not the same thing as a view from nowhere. Nonetheless, it is evident that Davey does not or perhaps cannot understand that people whose actions and words were set against the politicized seamen whose story he aims to represent, likewise believed that what they did was making the world a better place. A conflict-centered hermeneutic of social life probably accounts for the uneven distribution of morally salient descriptors. For example, the term "violence" is applied to the state and its officials only, never to the mutinous sailors (pp. 58, 61, 96). The latter group used "force" only against their shipboard opponents in 1797 (p. 220). Similarly, the navy's response to the mutiny is not called punishment but a "reprisal" (p. 233)—a term associated with atrocities committed by combatants against innocent civilians—within a larger panoply of state-
sponsored “repression.” Davey also sees through some sailors' statements of loyalty to king and country—the language of patriotism—as a species of rhetoric. Yet when sailors spoke about oppression and tyranny and rights (nouns generally left untouched by scare quotes), the susceptibility of "revolutionary" language to instrumentalization is ignored. Words of resistance and emancipation uttered by the weak evidently must ipso facto be genuine. Desertion likewise is understood as a form of political protest rather than faithlessness or cowardice. Too much sympathy for one "side" of a complex story sadly often tend toward one-sided interpretations. Nonetheless, Davey is scrupulous in reporting the fact of widespread popular and shipboard loyalism and patriotism. Yet his explanation for why sailors fought bravely at Camperdown, just months after the great munitiess, ignores over three decades of scholarship on motivation in war, not the least Ilya Berkovich's 2018 monograph.[1]

The book also leaves out important contextual elements that could have provoked interpretative recalibration. For example, readers new to the era might like to have learned that coercion was part of the tool kit employed by practically all eighteenth-century European states seeking to solve their manpower problems in wartime. The French Republic's declaration in August 1793 that all unmarried men aged eighteen to twenty-five were subject to military conscription is mentioned in the chapter following the one on naval impressment in Britain. A comparison of naval impressment in wartime and Prussia's Kantonsystem, which operated in peace and war, would have shed light on how tyrannical the Royal Navy's Manning method was in comparison to its great-power peers.

The scholarly apparatus of Tempest is very impressive: over sixty pages of endnotes, a bibliography that lists dozens of archival collections from ten different repositories, numerous newspapers and printed primary sources, and hundreds of secondary works. The richness of the book's source base makes the absence of any reference to the Board of Admiralty's meeting minutes all the more striking.[2] The late John Ehrman, author of another door-stopper book about a turbulent decade, judged the Admiralty's minutes the "most single valuable source" for making sense of the navy in the war of 1689-97.[3] There might be political-philosophical reasons for forgoing a crucial source for understanding the thinking of the navy's senior leadership during an unprecedented conflict, but failing to take it into account is regrettable historically.

At certain points, Davey renders judgements that make sense in light of his political sympathies but not in view of the history. For example, in his summation on the navy's response to the great mutinies of 1797, which involved thousands of sailors, Davey points out that 412 men from the Nore squadron were put on trial, fifty-two condemned to death, and twenty-nine executed. Davey calls this result an "astonishing" aspect of a "shocking" naval reckoning (p. 230). One wonders what the survivors of the Kronstadt naval mutiny of 1921 would have made of those numbers; probably they would have been shocked by the British Admiralty's resort to due process compared to the Bolsheviks' insouciant recourse to summary execution. Similarly, in his conclusion, Davey characterizes the British regime's punitive response to the politicization of sailors during the 1790s within a broader governmental context of "unprecedented state repression in the face of political dissent" (p. 309). This verdict is deeply puzzling in light of what the French revolutionary regime perpetrated in the Vendée during the same decade, and in view of Tudor rulers’ reactions to popular resistance in England in the sixteenth century, or their Stuart and Georgian successors' handling of later rebellions in Ireland and Scotland.
Tempest successfully situates the words and deeds of politicized Royal Navy sailors in the 1790s within a modern-oriented history of protest-driven political transformation. One sympathizes with scholars committed to the social philosophy underpinning this perspective and their preferential option for those coded as downtrodden. Nonetheless, prior to belonging to socially configured groups, women and men are persons. All persons, wherever they might have landed along established social and political hierarchies, strain in flawed ways to improve their lot in the lives they’ve been given. Forgetting this social fact seriously weakens Tempest’s persuasive force. Nonetheless, it will be a work worthy of serious consideration by naval, political, and social historians long after our own “troubled times” are over.

Notes


[2]. Board of Admiralty meeting minutes, 1657-1881, ADM 3, National Archives of the UK, London.


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