

The War for the Seas. A Maritime History of World War II. By Evan Mawdsley. Yale University Press, 2019. xlii+557 pp. \$32.50

Rather like buses, Mawdsley's book follows Craig Symonds' *World War II at Sea* (Oxford University Press, 2018), which is similarly lengthy and organised, but also with differences in coverage. Thus, Symonds, an American naval historian of distinction, devotes relatively more attention to the United States, while Mawdsley, who has written on the Eastern Front, does the same for the Soviet navy. Mawdsley also offers more on the Indian Ocean, but, while understandable, his pursuing a thematic approach within the five chronological sections can lead to an underplaying of the simultaneity that was so important in naval strategy, as well as to the transfer of experience. Simultaneity also captures the pressures of prioritisation and force allocation.

Those interested in the subject will welcome the differences between the two volumes and will wish to purchase both. Each offers much, although, considering the Mawdsley, the subject of this review, specialists might have preferred more use of unpublished original sources, including intelligence material. Separately, there is also a more general lack of discussion of the use of naval forces in terms of long-term consideration both of naval history and of strategic culture. There is far too little on interwar planning for future war and on the lessons learned both from World War I and from interwar developments. Nor is there an adequate discussion of the working out of the war in terms of lessons learned subsequently. Furthermore, some aspects of the naval war during World War Two, for example Swedish operations against Soviet submarines attacking iron ore shipments to Germany, are neglected.

Mawdsley is keen to deliver judgment, which is what readers expect, but there is at times room for more caution. For example, the respective merits of carriers and battleships remains a matter for debate, with the emphasis on the former, as in Mawdsley's 'the most powerful warships of World War II,' now qualified in the specialist literature. In particular, carriers were of limited value at night, in the fog, in high seas, and when in very close contact with opposing firepower; while battleships proved far more effective than bombers in engaging with shore defences, as in Sicily in 1943 and Normandy in 1944. Thus, Allied troops on Sicily encountered far more significant opposition once they were outside the range of Allied warships because the latter had suppressed these positions.

And so on. The naval history of the war does not have the 'open' character of operations on land, not least because there is no equivalent to the relatively understudied dimension of the war in China. Nevertheless, there are still sufficient topics up for debate to ensure that any treatment needs to be more conditional in tone and tentative in some of its judgments than is the case here. Moreover, Mawdsley's grasp of the historiography can be questioned, as in his claim that the effect of the *kamikaze* campaign off Okinawa is often exaggerated.

With these caveats, Mawdsley has produced a first-rate study, one that is well-written, and capable of providing informed coverage and analysis at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. The discussion of the Battle of the Atlantic is particularly good and offers a perspective from both Allied and Axis sides. There is a skilful integration of weapons systems, tactics, command styles, and intelligence, and a careful discussion of developments on both sides. This discussion of the Battle of the Atlantic also provides a comparative context for submarine warfare in the Pacific, where, again, Mawdsley covers a broad range, including torpedo malfunctions and Japanese atrocities.

A big book in every sense, and one that deserves attention. Mawdsley very much argues for the significance of the naval war and therefore of that in the Atlantic as he underlines Japan's strategic weakness and the greater challenge posed by Germany. As a consequence, both Britain and the Battle of the Atlantic bulk large. Indeed, Mawdsley suggests that the United States devoted too much of its naval, air and logistical resources to defeating Japan, a view that is surprising given the risk that Japan might knock out China or put more pressure on Britain in the Indian Ocean, repeating the highly successful sortie of early April 1942 into the latter. Moreover, resources were less fungible than Mawdsley, and many others, are prone to suggest. Partly because these and other counterfactuals come to mind, Mawdsley's work is invigorating; but, as a guide to the strategy of the conflict, it is worth noting that other perspectives exist. Moreover, naval issues need to be put in a wider context. Thus, it is possible to suggest that Japan might have done more to hinder American arms shipments to the Soviet Union, but there was no wish to jeopardise Japanese-Soviet neutrality.

(680 words)

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