

As for *Unbroken*, it was sent to the Soviet Navy in 1944, as a part of lend-lease to the Soviets and returned in 1949. Sadly, a ship which had defied depth charges and all kinds of seas could not remain unbroken – it was scrapped in 1950. Mars's final words regarding his submarine are poignant ones – he was saddened that his boat was reduced to scrap, but at the same time, he was glad that *Unbroken* had not rusted away in some dockyard. He hoped, that, through the use of scrap metal, *Unbroken* would continue to serve the RN in some vastly different form. Perhaps *Unbroken* still sails today, more than 70 years later, in an even more vastly-changed form.

This book is worth reading, as it brings to the reader the immediacy of submarine warfare. The reader feels the crew's fear undergoing depth charge attack. Mars communicates life on board a submarine and ashore in a high-danger zone. The book fills in another gap in the history of the Second World War, but could have been improved by photographs of *Unbroken* and Mars. A brief biography of Mars could have been included, as the back cover merely states that Mars left the RN due to differences of opinions over postings and service. As a straight reprint, however, such inclusions might have increased the price of the book. Those suggestions aside, this book is recommended.

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Stephen McLaughlin. *Russian and Soviet Battleships*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, www.usni.org, 2021. xviii+496 pp., illustrations, drawings, tables, notes, bibliography, appendix, index. US \$120.00, cloth: ISBN: 978-1-68247-726-7.

The Naval Institute Press has reprinted Stephen McLaughlin's classic study of Russian/Soviet battleship design. First published in 2003, *Russian and Soviet Battleships* immediately became the standard reference on Imperial Russian/Soviet capital ships. Quickly out of print, it was soon only obtainable at a steep premium with second-hand prices quoted as high as \$1,000 US. Although the author did not have the opportunity to revise the text, this volume is a welcome reprinting of a definitive design study.

Russian and Soviet Battleships follows the well sailed track for warship design studies with a chapter for each new (or proposed) vessel or class of ships. Indeed, some of the best chapters deal with the proposed Soviet battleships and the modifications to surviving Tsarist dreadnoughts. The author understands that the Imperial Russian/Soviet Navy generally played second fiddle to the Army in both financial terms and in prestige. The army was a necessity while naval development was cramped by geography and an underdeveloped

economy. Of the two problems facing the Russian/Soviet Navy, the attempted economic catch-up led to more significant difficulties. This was particularly true with regard to the dearth of draftsmen and other technicians to support Russia's naval architects.

Russian and Soviet Battleships does not deal with the numerous monitors nor the belted cruising vessels of the 1860s, starting instead with the first, true, Russian ironclad battleship, *Pëtr Velikii* (Peter the Great). The design and construction reflected two recurring tendencies that plagued armoured ship development. The first, was that it usually took a long time from the inspiration for a design to the finished product. Secondly, quality control was not always a strong suit for Russian shipyards. The trigger for the design came from an unlikely source, the voyage of the double turret monitor, USS *Miantonomoh* to Kronshtadt in 1866. The vessel impressed Vice-Admiral Popov (of circular ironclad fame), with its seakeeping qualities. Then backed by support from the Imperial court, Grand Duke Nikolaevich, General-Admiral of the Navy and the Tsar's younger brother, Popov designed a masted, double-turret monitor. The proposed vessel was sort of an HMS *Captain* on steroids for the Pacific Fleet. After *Captain's* untimely demise, the plans were reworked. Eventually *Pëtr Velikii* was completed in 1876, after suggested design changes by Sir Edward Reed, the former chief constructor to the Royal Navy. She bore a resemblance to HMS *Dreadnought* of 1874. Unfortunately, *Pëtr Velikii's* boilers did not meet expectations and it was not until after a refit by John Elder's of Glasgow in 1881-1882 that she could be considered a satisfactory fighting ship.

Some later Russian battleships also exhibited signs of faulty design or sloppy construction. The most notorious was *Gangut* of 1889, which was lost in 1897 after striking an uncharted rock. The ship was overweight on completion, with watertight doors that did not fit properly and its pumping system was inadequate. But as McLaughlin points out, the Imperial Russian Navy was not alone when it came to design problems and faulty construction of its warships. Nor were all Russian battleships floating coffins, even those that sank in battle demonstrated a certain toughness. The *Borodino* class, three of which were sunk at Tsushima, were a case in point. While not without their faults, these vessels, though grossly overloaded, survived a great deal of damage before succumbing to Japanese fire.

McLaughlin's discussion of the torturous Soviet design process is illuminating. The First World War and the Revolutions of 1917 put an end to what progress the Tsarist navy had made in its recovery from the Russo-Japanese War. Soviet five-year plans focussed on non-maritime heavy industry, electrification, and forced collectivisation of agriculture. While Stalin had a fetish for battleships, precious little steel went to Soviet shipyards. Naval architects, including holdovers from pre-revolutionary times, designed new

armoured vessels, seemingly at the whim of party hacks. In reality, Stalin was the final arbitrator of naval policy including technical matters. Thus, everyone beneath him in the chain of command had to follow (and anticipate) his lead, including naval architects. The Soviet Navy was hard hit by the purges, particularly the various design bureaus. At one point, the most experienced naval architect was only 32 years old. This lack of residual knowledge, coupled with ever-changing priorities and the consequent overwork, was one of the main reasons why no battleships were ever completed for the Soviet Navy. Ironically, the nation's inability to build a traditional navy before the Second World War resulted in a steel industry more geared to producing tanks than warships. In hindsight, this turned out to have been a more rational outcome than Stalin could have dreamed of.

Russian and Soviet Battleships, particularly the section dealing with Soviet battleships, should be required reading for naval bureaucrats and their political masters who are concerned with equipment procurement, whether the platforms being acquired are frigates or helicopters. Some Russian warships were badly designed and built, but the resulting vessels were not much worse than the equivalent ships built in Western Europe or the United States before 1914. Russian naval procurement only completely fell to pieces with the onset of Stalin's purges in the 1930s. McLaughlin's work is more than just a design study of bygone warships; it is a commentary on rational and irrational decision making. This reprinting of *Russian and Soviet Battleships* is highly recommended to those who did not purchase it the first time around.

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David Miller. *Langsdorff and the Battle of the River Plate*. Command Decisions Series. Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen and Sword Maritime, www.pen-and-sword.com, 2021. Reprint from 2013. (Distributed by Casemate Publishing). 208 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US \$24.95, paper; ISBN: 978-1-52679-697-4. (E-book available.)

It is definitely odd which topics dominate the historical discussion of any given period. When the Second World War at sea is considered, most people think of the long-term struggle of attrition that we know as the U-boat war. Alternately, they may consider critical engagements like the Battle of Midway. What is often forgotten are the many smaller, but no less important, battles that seldom receive more than a vague reference or a footnote. One of these moments was the Battle of the River Plate. Fought on the morning of 13 December 1939, it was the first major surface naval battle between the German and British