

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

navies in the Second World War. It saw a German commerce raider, the pocket battleship KM *Admiral Graf Spee*, square off against a British heavy cruiser, HMS *Exeter*, and the two light cruisers, HMS *Ajax* and HMS *Achilles* in the South Atlantic. Roughly an hour and a half later the battle was essentially over. Although heavily outgunned by *Graf Spee*, and despite heavy damage to *Exeter*, the British forces under Admiral Henry Harwood were able to inflict sufficient damage on *Kapitan zur See* Hans Langsdorff's *Graf Spee* to force him to withdraw. He sought sanctuary in Montevideo, Uruguay, to conduct repairs and bury the dead. Forced to leave the neutral port on 17 December and faced with the prospect of British reinforcements and a hopeless cause, *Graf Spee* was scuttled by her crew and her captain committed suicide. Usually mentioned only in passing, commerce raiding by *Graf Spee* was a serious enough issue to warrant the dispersal of forces to hunt the ship down and sink it. Yet, very little is actually written about *Graf Spee* or the Battle of the River Plate, despite the fact that this battle helped to shape the eventual confrontation in Norway. This 189-page book is a reprint of Miller's original 2013 text, providing a fascinating window into not just Langsdorff and the challenging command decisions he had to make, but *Graf Spee*'s operations up to that point and the battle itself. Miller, an accomplished writer on military history, brings a rich background of experience spanning histories of Richard the Lionheart, the U-boat war, and the Battle of Waterloo. *Langsdorff and the Battle of the River Plate* is the result of years of study of Captain Hans Langsdorff, one of Germany's most admired naval officers.

The book's 24 chapters are broken into four parts. The first part examines the historical background of German surface raiding in two chapters that address the experience and lessons of the First World War. The nine chapters of part two break down the design of the Deutschland-class *Panzerschiffe*. The war cruise of *Graf Spee* is the focus of part three where 12 chapters follow its cruise before the Battle of the River Plate as well as its last battle. It takes our understanding of Langsdorff right through to his death by his own hand after scuttling his ship. Finally, part four provides formal conclusions. Supported by three annexes, this represents one of the best breakdowns of the *Graf Spee* and its captain's only wartime cruise.

The breakdown of the Deutschland-class was particularly interesting. Besides the usual discussion of guns or engine specifics, something that is always fascinating as the small technical details add flavour to our understanding, the inclusion of chapter 10 dealing specifically with replenishment at sea was particularly revealing. Realizing that Germany would not have control of the seas in the future, and that any long-range raider had to be supplied in some way with munitions, fuel, and stores, the Kriegsmarine made a concerted effort to solve this problem. Their solution was the develop a fleet-support

ship capable of carrying fuel and supplies for an extended operational tour. The *Altmark* was one of five ships built to support the German raiders and was specifically tasked to support *Graf Spee*. Known as the Dithmarschen-class, these ships carried everything needed by a raider at sea, including methods of replenishment at sea. The challenges of transferring fuel, spare parts, food, and above all else, munitions between ships while in the open ocean should not be ignored. While a far step from modern fleet replenishment ships, these Dithmarschen-class ships represent the first design built for the purpose of supporting combat ships far from safe harbours.

Equally as important as the design of resupply ships, is the analytical component of each chapter. Taking the reader through the material and then providing detailed analysis is very useful and directly supports Miller's argument that the issues at play here were Langsdorff's command decisions and the forces shaping them. The combination of history and analysis gives the reader a good sense of events and their impact on the mind of the Captain. Miller goes out of his way to try to give the reader a sense of what Langsdorff's options really were, based on what he knew at the time. For example, regarding his decision to head for a neutral harbour, Miller reminds the reader of the intelligence estimates that Langsdorff had and what he knew for certain. It makes for an interesting read regarding his options.

The greatest limitation for this book rests with the serious lack of citation. The little that is provided is minimal and reduces the value of the text, although with so little written on the battle, perhaps it is not surprising. That, however, is exactly why it is needed. For scholars and those interested in naval history, additional sources would greatly improve the field. Likewise, the accounts of events are a bit brief in places, giving a bit of an abridged feel to the story. Readers may be getting the straight facts as they exist, but I was left hungry for more.

On the whole, this is an interesting account, well written and enjoyable to read. It represents some of the best work on the Battle of the River Plate and as such, should definitely be considered by more than just those interested in the period or the individuals involved. It is an account that many would find useful and definitely a satisfying read.

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Nicky Nielsen. *The Pirate Captain Ned Low: His Life and Mysterious Fate*. Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2022. xvii+205 pp., illustrations, map, list of crew, bibliography, notes, index. UK £20.00, US \$34.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-39909-431-3. (E-book available.)