

drifters, and innumerable small craft. Still, it offers an unusual background to help one understand how and why the famous sea lift was accomplished. This work helps redress an historical imbalance by clarifying the complexities faced on both sides. I enthusiastically recommend Robert Kershaw's excellent work to those who wish to know more about this turning point in World War II from a unique and important perspective.

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Angus Konstam (Jim Laurier, illus.). *Royal Navy Home Fleet 1939-41: The Last Line of Defence at Scapa Flow*. Oxford, UK, www.ospreypublishing.uk, 2024. 80 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. Price US \$23.00, CDN \$31.00, paper. ISBN 978-1-47286-1-148-1; and,

Enrico Cernuschi (Edouard Groult, illus.). *Italian Battlefleet 1940-43: 'La Squadra', the Pride of the Regia Marina*. Oxford, UK, www.ospreypublishing.uk, 2024. 80 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index. Price US \$23.00, CDN \$31.00, paper. ISBN 978-1-47286-0-59-0.

A relatively new offering from Osprey Publishing is a series describing various "fleets" operated by a variety of nations during the twentieth century. Thus far there are ten in the series, with the Konstam volume representing the fifth and the Cernuschi the sixth. There are more being contemplated, including one that takes the story of the Home Fleet to the end of the Second World War. Conceptually, the notion of exploring a given fleet within a broader navy is an interesting approach to analyze the interplay between types of ships, their base or bases, and their operations under the pressures of war. Too often in more typical studies of warships that focus on technical or design elements, operations and performance is downplayed. This series attempts to provide both an exploration of the ships as well as how well they fulfilled their roles in wartime conditions and, as such, provides a useful companion to other Osprey series that examine, for example, ship types directly.

Organisationally the series addresses four specific areas: purpose; fighting power and technology; the "how" of operations; and combat and analysis. This is followed by very brief suggestions for further reading (more below) and an index.

Konstam's assessment of the British Home Fleet in the first years of the Second World War will be explored first. It covers the period from the war's opening to the immediate aftermath of the *Bismarck* sortie in May 1941. The function of the Home Fleet was to deal with the German surface threat and

to defend the British coast in the event of an invasion attempt. The latter capacity was not put to the test, and the first goal was largely achieved with the destruction of the *Bismarck*. Thereafter, the Home Fleet shifted to support of the Russian convoys and dealing with the surface threat based out of northern Norway. This period is to be the subject of a separate book touched on above. The difficulties the British experienced in stretching their all too thin resources over all too many objectives are dealt with briefly but successfully.

The second section addresses the warships, technology, organisation, and the Home Fleet base at Scapa Flow. In terms of warships, helpful tables are provided that list them all (capital ships and cruisers by name, destroyers and minor warships by type and number) at the start of the war and then in mid-1940. The point is made that vessels were constantly cycled in and out of the Home Fleet to other areas as judged necessary by the Admiralty and to accommodate maintenance. Technology is explored as well by describing the interwar developments, notably radio direction finding, wireless communications, asdic and radar, and the capability and use of airpower.

The longest section covers how the fleet operated. This includes how the ships were organised into squadrons or flotillas. The doctrine discussed includes a review of how the various branches of Britain's armed forces worked together, noting the institutional and administrative difficulties (by no means unique) involved in securing smooth co-operation between services. Also addressed are the basic strategic and geographical issues with which the successive commanders of the Home Fleet had to contend. Finally, the important matters of intelligence, logistics and maintenance facilities, and Scapa Flow as a base.

The final element assessed operations. The highlights, beyond more details involving the inadequate Scapa Flow defences in 1939 and the sinking of *Royal Oak*, involved the ill-fated Norwegian Campaign, dealing with the Kriegsmarine's Atlantic surface raiders, and the *Bismarck* episode. These are all covered in a workman-like fashion. The volume concludes with an analysis of the Home Fleet's performance during the first two years of the war. It was a close-run thing in many respects, but the Royal Navy surmounted the challenges successfully and fulfilled the essential functions demanded of it.

Cernuschi's book on the Italian battlefleet has significant merit in that the historiography in English is light in its assessment of foreign archives. Cernuschi has thus provided an important and helpful window into the Mediterranean war from the Italian perspective by examining Italian primary sources (these are in the bibliography) and delivering a new perspective on Italian naval operations from June 1940 to September 1943. Cernuschi has published extensively in Italy as well as in translation with the Naval Institute Press. A recent work, *Dark Navy: The Italian Regia Marina and the Armistice of 8 September 1943*, with Vincent O'Hara, is an example of his, for English-

speaking audiences, groundbreaking work.

The book is organised in an identical fashion to Konstam's, albeit with some difference in execution. It is apparent that the structure was imposed as part of the arrangement for this series. The section covering the purpose of the Regia Marina's (RM) battle fleet includes a section on doctrine. It notes the continuities between the pre-Great War Italian ambitions and their interwar plans and assumptions. Fighting Britain was never intended. Indeed, Mussolini's foreign policy during the 1930s was unsurprisingly Mediterranean in focus, with only tentative links with Germany. Dealing with France was seen as doable, dealing with Britain less so. Consequently, warship construction plans, rarely in the event executed, were devised to match French activity. The overarching objective was to control the seas around Italy and the links to the North African coast, and to deny these to an enemy, then perceived as France.

The chapter on the fighting capabilities of the battleship force does explore the full range of Italian naval capacities as well as that of the Italian air force, the *Regia Aeronautica* (RA). The co-operation (or lack thereof) between the RA and RM mirrored that between the RAF and RN during the interwar period. Cernuschi includes a detailed discussion of the lack of naval aviation and the search for a carrier in the interwar period. This absence plagued the RM for the entire war. The review of interwar battleship development is well done and describes the modernisation of Great War veterans, e.g. *Conte di Cavour*, and the construction of the *Littorio* class. Finally, there is a short exploration of technical matters including shell design, armour, fire control doctrine and capabilities, and torpedoes.

The section dealing with operations examines command and communications, intelligence and deception, and logistics. It would have benefited from a table listing the various commands held by Italian admirals during the war period as the shuffling around can be confusing. A brief description of the structure of command for the RM would have been helpful in setting parameters for an unfamiliar audience. The section on intelligence was most interesting in that the Italians were very successful, including in counter-intelligence and code-breaking. British intelligence is assessed as inferior to Italian, which certainly challenges received opinion on the matter. Logistics is briefly dealt with and is presented as adequate to need, although oil was a pressing problem for the entire war and restricted operations.

The largest section of the book, representing about half of the 80 pages, covers war operations and analysis. The war between the RN and RM broke out in July 1940 with the action off Calabria, with the exit of France after its defeat by Germany. The description of the engagement can be characterised as a series of correctives of the official British accounts of the battle, which are useful in and of themselves. Cernuschi concludes that this was the biggest naval engagement in the European and Atlantic theatres of operations, which

went Italy's way. From there, much of the Axis effort of supplying by sea North Africa and the Balkans was highly successful until the very end in 1943. Engagements between the RM and RN were frequent during the post-Calabria period to 1943. Italian success or near success was matched by similar outcomes from the British perspective to the extent that honours can perhaps be described as evenly distributed. By mid-1943, Allied material superiority finally told the tale, and the RM was significantly outnumbered in all aspects of naval war by that point. Political and military factors, less so naval, led to the Italian Armistice in September 1943, with the surrender of the fleet as part of the arrangements.

The conclusion of the book assesses the performance of the RM's battlefleet. That performance is described as creditable and comparable in many ways to that of the RN in terms of matériel, gunnery, shell quality, and damage control. The RM was outclassed only in terms of technologies such as radar and in telecommunications. In essence, the RM was a thoroughly professional force that did its duty to a high standard throughout the war. Importantly, Cernuschi has delivered an interesting, useful, and revelatory exploration of the RM that challenges one-dimensional accounts common in English language historiography.

Both books are produced to a high standard with photographs to illustrate the text, as well as coloured diagrams illustrating battles, operational areas, or geostrategic matters. As is typical, the books include two-page original images of pertinent scenes that are well done and provide a good sense of the atmosphere experienced by participants in the two subject fleets. In terms of writing, there is unevenness in expression suggesting some haste in finalising the two books to meet a publishing schedule. Additionally, not all will agree with the authors' conclusions. This is always a danger in such short accounts that really do not permit a deep plunge into the topic or the standard academic apparatus of typical monographs. Food for thought is, however, provided by both. Lastly, the bibliographies, particularly Konstam's, are very brief indeed with some odd omissions. These do no more than suggest where more detail can be found.

I can recommend both as a useful introduction to the subjects they cover. Neither pretends to be comprehensive and that is inherent in the format. Cernuschi, in particular, provides information that will be new to many. Konstam provides a focus on a key British command that is more known by title than anything else. This particular series, "Fleets," is an interesting initiative by Osprey and one worth exploring.

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