

Martin Middlebrook. *Convoy SC122 and HX229: Climax of the Battle of the Atlantic, March 1943*. (Originally published 2011). Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen and Sword Maritime, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2020. 352 pp., illustrations, maps, appendices, bibliography, index. UK £16.99, paper: ISBN 978-1-84884-478-0. (E-book available.)

In an age when new titles seem to be released in a seemingly endless torrent, issuing a reprint of a relatively recent work seems to be a questionable publishing tactic. Nonetheless, reprint editions have proven to be very popular among both publishers and their audience. The author of this particular reprint, Martin Middlebrook, needs no special introduction, being a military historian of the first rank. He has written extensively on all aspects of both the world wars of the early twentieth century—including aviation, military and naval history. Consequently, he is fully aware that battles are never fought in a vacuum. This volume focusses on the Battle of the Atlantic and a bitter convoy battle that was fought at the very fringe of what is commonly seen as the turning point of this epic struggle.

He tells the compelling story of two convoys that ran the North Atlantic gauntlet against German submarines (U-boats) in March 1943 in seventeen well-written chapters. Aply supporting his detailed text are an insightful introduction, six comprehensive appendices, several maps and situational diagrams and over 30 well-chosen illustrations. After providing the requisite back story of the war situation in early 1943, the weapons used, and more importantly, the nature of the military and civilian crews involved, the pace of the volume quickly picks up. The author describes the formation of these convoys and their organization from the moment

when their ships and escorts first gathered until their eventual sailing. He also provides information on the intelligence available to each side regarding the composition and intentions of their opponents before they sailed, and then introduces several of the key and some “incidental” characters and ships that would participate in the coming test of wills that mark this story. These brief “introductions” really help to flesh out his narrative and provide readers with some insights as to why so many sailors and a few intrepid passengers dared to sail the North Atlantic in this period.

Subsequent chapters discuss their voyages. While some have seen the convoys’ individual struggles as a shared joint “experience,” as Middlebrook points out, the two convoys were never closer than roughly 90 nautical miles from each other. In fact, the Admiralty failed to take advantage of this distance to order a redistribution of escorts from the less threatened convoy to the more beleaguered one. Their relative proximity also misled Admiral Dönitz’s U-boat command, which had difficulty in determining which convoy was being attacked when. The result was a condensed U-boat action summary combining two separate attacks into one struggle against a very large convoy. The author uses their experiences to expose several weaknesses in their defences, including appallingly weak escort and aerial support. Middlebrook also argues that far more long range aircraft were available than those that were actually assigned to closing the North Atlantic “Air Gap” during their voyages. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the few aircraft that actually supported these convoys made an impressive number of attacks on U-boats forcing them to dive.

Nor are his criticisms and observations limited to the Allies. He also

points out that the Kriegsmarine (German Navy) should have made better use of their specialized, albeit limited in number, supply U-boats. While critical of the Allies' failure to fully exploit their intelligence, Middlebrook notes that Admiral Dönitz and his staff never took full advantage of theirs either. Moreover, he notes, the Germans never realized the extent to which their communications had been compromised. This failure is all the more inexcusable because several German U-boat officers were to voice their suspicions of this throughout the last half of the war. The author could have also mentioned that German U-boat commanders were actually more hampered by a lack of aerial reconnaissance than their counterparts. In the end, convoys *SCI22* and *HX229* suffered serious losses—22 merchant vessels lost as against one U-boat. Nonetheless, given that 42 U-boats actually operated against these convoys, their success seems relatively small and is a good indicator of the declining effectiveness of German U-boats.

Middlebrook is not content to leave the story here. His account concludes with a recap of the careers and subsequent history of many of the individuals and ships featured in his text. This is perhaps the strongest element of the story, as readers are given an even better grounding in the consequences of this struggle, in regard to the war itself as well as the personal histories of some of the individuals who appear in this volume. The six appendices are of great value to the reader as well, all but the last of them focusing on these two convoys. Based primarily on countless interviews with participants in these events, the lack of detailed notes and bibliography are at best a very minor quibble. Overall, this volume is still a worthwhile read.

Peter K. H. Mispelkamp  
Pointe Claire, Quebec

Nicholas Papastratigakis. *Russian Imperialism and Naval Power. Military Strategy and the Build-up to the Russo-Japanese War*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, www.bloomsbury.com, 2020. x+342 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. UK £26.09, US \$39.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-35016-549-6. (E-book available.)

In this fine monograph, Nicholas Papastratigakis has delivered to the maritime history community an important account of a much-neglected aspect of the pre-Great War world, that of Russia's late-nineteenth century imperialist ambitions and the role played by its navy in securing them. In contrast, albeit not notably rich, accounts of Russia's far east foe, Japan, enjoy significant attention and regard. Admiration abounds for Japan's pluck and its well-earned triumphs during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, tinged perhaps with reservations regarding the future course of history in the middle decades of the twentieth century. For Russia, the received view tends towards contempt for a declining autocracy that set new standards for ineptitude and incompetence. That both perspectives are a little unbalanced is largely due to the historiography, which is decidedly thin, particularly in English. Papastratigakis has provided a needed addition to accounts in English from Russia's perspective on this entire subject. It is an excellent contribution to the history of both the preliminaries to the Russo-Japanese War itself, as well as providing important insights into a largely unstudied aspect of the pre-Great War diplomacy and strategic calculus.

To set the context, Papastratigakis commences his account with two chapters that summarize the role of naval power in relation to Russia's imperial ambition and its influence on national