

Book Reviews

Michael Alpert. *The Spanish Civil War at Sea. Dark and Dangerous Waters*. Barnsley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword Military, www.pen-and-sword.co.uk, 2021. xi+288 pp., illustrations, maps, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. UK £25.00, cloth; ISBN 978-1-52-676-436-2. (E-book available.)

The 1936-39 Spanish Civil War continues to attract historians and students of revolutions and military actions. The land and air campaigns have been well-documented, but not the naval aspects of the Spanish Civil War, at least in English. With *The Spanish Civil War At Sea: Dark and Dangerous Waters*, Michael Alpert, an historian who has published several previous works on various aspects of the Spanish Civil War, fills that gap with a comprehensive narrative of that tragic war's maritime aspects. (While Alpert uses the standard term "Republican(s)" for the forces loyal to the Spanish government in 1936, he describes the forces commanded by Francisco Franco that challenged the Spanish government as "Insurgent(s)" rather than the more familiar term "Nationalist(s)." This review will use Insurgent(s) for consistency with the text.)

Civil wars, by their nature, split a nation's population into competing factions, including that nation's military. The Spanish Civil War was no exception, splitting the Spanish Navy into Republican and Insurgent navies. It should be remembered that the Spanish fleet was relatively new in 1936, having had to be rebuilt after near total destruction by the US Navy in the 1898 Spanish-American War in the naval battles of Manila Bay and Santiago. Moreover, Spain endured years of internal turmoil prior to the outbreak of civil war. The Spanish Navy split along rank lines: the enlisted ranks and NCOs tended to side with the Republicans, while officers and the Naval General Staff sided with the Insurgents. The two sides split the combat vessels: the Republicans had one battleship, three cruisers, 13 destroyers plus three more destroyers that entered service during the war, 12 submarines (the entire Spanish submarine fleet), seven torpedo boats, one gunboat, and four armed Coast Guard cutters. The Insurgents commanded one battleship, four cruisers, three minelayers, five torpedo boats, three gunboats, and five Coast Guard Cutters. While the Republican Navy seemed to have a numerical advantage over the Insurgent Navy, the Republicans faced major difficulties. Their submarines were old and the torpedoes they fired were frequently unreliable (a fact which plagued the submarines of many navies in the Second World War). Also, the Republican naval leadership was lacking – the most competent

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naval leadership deserted to the Insurgents. Often, ships or departments were commanded by inexperienced Republican junior officers. The Insurgents, while lacking personnel for their ships, were often able to call seamen from the Spanish Merchant Marine or train sailors *ab initio* to a satisfactory level of performance.

Both sides in the Spanish Civil War were aided by other nations – on the ground, in the air, and on the sea. Soviet pilots and aircraft aided the Republicans in the air along with other foreign volunteers. On the ground, were Soviet armoured vehicles and foreign volunteers (the famous “International Brigades”), while officers from the Soviet Navy served at sea. The Insurgents were aided in the air by German and Italian pilots and aircraft, by German armored vehicles and military advisors plus Italian troops and tanks on the ground, and at sea by Italian submarines and German naval advisors.

The Spanish Civil War at sea is somewhat complicated to describe, as Spain essentially has three seacoasts – the Mediterranean, the Atlantic seacoast west of Gibraltar, and, separated by the nation of Portugal, the Cantabrian Sea on the northwest coast of Spain. Alpert relates the various naval actions in each area of operations. He describes the efforts of the various forces involved, the ship-versus-ship conflicts, as well as the success of Italian and German submarines in interdicting supplies to the Republicans which contributed significantly to the ultimate Insurgent victory.

The picture Alpert paints of both navies is a disappointing one. The Republicans had the majority of ships and crews but little leadership. The Insurgents had the naval leadership but lacked ships and crews. The advantage of the Insurgents in naval leadership mirrored their advantages in the air and on the ground. The Republicans were constantly plagued by infighting and rivalries. The Insurgent forces were more cohesive, a distinct factor in the war’s outcome.

Alpert describes the political background of Spain prior to the outbreak of hostilities in chapter one and in each succeeding chapter describes the naval war. He writes well and the narrative flows. Photographs of the ships and persons involved in the naval war give the reader visual connections to the text as does the cover photo of a dramatic painting of France superimposed on a Spanish destroyer. Appendices detail the specifications of Spanish ships and list the Soviet naval officers that were assigned to the Republicans. The notes and bibliography furnish ample material for further reading and study. The concluding chapter reviews the major points in the text and gives the reader food for thought. The only negative comment – and it is a minor one – is that the maps in this book appear to be hand-drawn and labeled, which takes away from the overall presentation of this book.

Most wars are won on the ground, and the Spanish Civil War was no

exception. The Republic started to disintegrate in winter, 1939. The remaining units of the Republican Navy sailed for neutral ports in French North Africa and were interned. In Spain itself, the Republican forces fought with each other. Republican leadership hoped, perhaps, to prolong the Civil War long enough for a broader European war to break out (which occurred when Germany invaded Poland 1 September 1939). A wider war would cause Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union to cease their respective involvements in Spain, leaving room for Republicans and Insurgents to come to some sort of settlement. That hope was dashed when Insurgent troops entered the Spanish capital of Madrid on 28 March 1939, ending the war.

Alpert's book illuminates the least-known aspect of the Spanish Civil War. It is a good read, a valuable reference, and is recommended.

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Thomas Barthel. *Opening the East River: John Newton and the Blasting of Hell Gate*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, www.mcfarlandbooks.com, 2021. 226 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. US \$39.95, paper; ISBN 978-1-4766-8298-3. (E-book available.)

In the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War, the maritime commercial interests of New York City, which were vitally important to the well-being of the nation as a whole, were faced with a daunting navigational dilemma. The East River, along with the Hudson River, was a major waterway into New York Harbour, yet its waters were anything but ideal for the movement of ships, particularly as they grew in size and value with increasing commercial trade. Beset with numerous hindrances, particularly rocks and reefs, whirlpools driven by the turbulent currents, and vigorous tides, the river was a genuine ship breaker. Seeking to significantly curtail, if not entirely prevent future merchant marine deaths, as well as cargo and ship losses, General John Newton of the Army Corps of Engineers, was tasked with clearing the river. Over the next 19 years, Newton would tenaciously tackle this task, relying on a mixture of sheer manpower, developing technology, and his engineering prowess. This process would be finalized in 1885 when the massive nine-acre Flood Rock was demolished in front of tens of thousands of onlookers through the use of 282,730 pounds of high explosives.

While it was John Newton who was tasked with finally fully opening the East River to maritime trade and who was praised by the National Academy of Sciences for his work, the task was truly too large for any singular person. In recognition of this, this book is not a biography. Rather, Barthel uses Newton