Reluctant Allies: German-Japanese Naval Relations in World War II

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the national war effort.” As a result, the characteristics of sound transmission beneath the surface of the oceans, especially the effects exerted by thermal layers, became the focus of scientific research sponsored by the Navy. By 1918 the resulting underwater sound-sensing and transmission systems had “helped keep the U-boats at bay.”

World War I ended less than two years after the United States entered, and for a few years thereafter it seemed as if the wartime spirit of cooperation in the naval-scientific inquiry into oceanography’s utility to naval warfare would continue. However, the Republican era was a time of American isolationism and naval retrenchment, and by 1924 the budgetary axe had decapitated the fledgling naval-scientific hybrid. A revival of the joint effort by scientists and the Navy did not come until 1940, but not until the attack on Pearl Harbor did the fiscal floodgates of defense spending on such topics truly swing open.

In the Second World War the final form of American naval oceanography began to emerge. Just as the submarine is the weapons system around which Weir weaves his story, his concept of a cultural clash between naval officers and scientists constitutes his institutional or political theme. Still, as Weir points out, “Effective submariners and ASW officers soon realized that applied oceanography improved a ship’s chance of survival and increased the likelihood that crew-members would again see their families after a difficult North Atlantic convoy or a submarine patrol near the Japanese home islands.” Besides patriotic motivation, the scientists hoped that memory of “the profitable wartime application of oceanography and the lives spared in combat would induce the Navy to become the generous patron” of postwar oceanography.

That was how it turned out, but only because the unanticipated Soviet submarine threat provided an irresistible impetus for many shrewd oceanographers and some astute naval officers who served as the “translators” between their respective cultures. The two groups cooperated for mutual and national benefit in the Cold War, but the cultures of the warrior and the scientist remained as separate as oil in water. Their testimonials were parallel, not unified—the invincibility of U.S. fast-attack and fleet ballistic missile submarines for the Navy, and the intellectual fecundity of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography for science. This book is not light reading, but it is invaluable to every serious student of naval strategy, weapons systems, and the marine environment that shapes and limits modern warfare at sea.

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With the exception of Carl Boyd, John Chapman, Gerhard Krebbs, and Bernd Martin, historians have largely ignored German-Japanese relations in general and naval relations in particular. (A further exception would be Werner Rahn; see his “Japan and Germany, 1941–1943: No Common Objective, No Common Plans, No Basis of Trust,” in

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the Summer 1993 issue of this journal.)
That gap in the literature has now been
filled by this collection of essays by four
eminent German and Japanese naval of-
ficers and historians: Hans-Joachim
Krug, Yôichi Hirama, Berthold J.
Sander-Nagashima, and Axel Niestlé.
Each contributes from his research spe-
cialty, and the product is a welcome re-
examination of a “missed opportunity”
based on sources in British, German,
Part I consists of a historical overview
and analysis of German-Japanese naval
cooperation by Captain Krug, German
Navy, and Admiral Hirama, Japan Mari-
time Self-Defense Force. Their message
is straightforward—there never existed
real cooperation between Berlin and
Tokyo, as each side was intent merely to
use the other to further its own power-
political agenda. This is as true for the
Anti-Comintern Pact of November 1936
as it is for the follow-up Agreement for
Cultural Cooperation of November
1939. Various technical, joint, and mili-
tary affairs committees were eventually
formed, mainly for “propaganda pur-
poses”; they never met before Pearl Har-
bor and thereafter only “for protocol
and courtesy.” The result was a “reluc-
tant” alliance. In August 1939 Adolph
Hitler did not tell the Japanese of Ger-
many’s nonaggression pact with the
Soviet Union until two days before its
signing. In April 1941 Hitler refused to
inform the visiting Japanese foreign
minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, of his deci-
sion to invade the Soviet Union.
Matsuoka, in turn, did not inform the
Germans that on his way home he would
sign a neutrality pact with the Soviets.
The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor
came as a complete surprise to the Ger-
mans. Hastily arranged joint warfare
agreements among the three Axis powers
on 11 December 1941 and 18 January
1942 brought few concrete measures.
Much of the book rests on the detailed
radio transmissions of the German naval
attachés in Tokyo, Admiral Paul
Wenneker and Captain Joachim
Lietzmann. These show that even in the
area of possible joint operations in the
Indian and Pacific Oceans, there was
mutual mistrust and jealousy. This
stemmed from lack of prior cooperation,
racial arrogance (by both sides), linguis-
tic difficulties, and especially the fact
that German auxiliary merchant cruisers
and submarines had to diesel more than
thirteen thousand miles across a hun-
dred degrees of longitude en route to the
Far East. Admiral Karl Dönitz reduced
the cargo capacity of U-boats by insist-
ing that they carry full loads of torpe-
does; he refused to share German
weapons and equipment technology
with the Japanese until August 1944, and
then only at Hitler’s insistence. In the
Indian Ocean, the one place where Ger-
mans and Japanese naval forces might
have been able to coordinate operations,
nothing of the sort eventuated.
Part II, by Sander-Nagashima, a German
naval officer and historian, fleshes out
much of the above. Sander-Nagashima
first analyzes the command structure of
both navies and then examines technical
and personnel matters (“Cooperation
with Caution”). He is especially critical
of German duplicity in continuing to
supply Chiang Kai-shek with military
material in large quantities and in build-
submarines for China, stating that
they were for Germany—in the process
“purposefully fooling the befriended
Japanese.” Perhaps in return, the Japa-
nese refused to give direct help to Ger-
man warships in the Far East; supplies,
until 22 June 1941, had to be shipped via the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In the final analysis, Sander-Nagashima concludes, naval cooperation between the two allies was restricted to “the limitation of the operational zones through 70 degrees east longitude.”

Part III, written by Niestlé, a businessman and author of numerous works on German U-boats, details the meager logistical exchanges between Berlin and Tokyo. In terms of passengers traveling by transport ship, a mere twenty-one people went from Europe to Japan, and not quite nine hundred from the Far East to Europe; by submarine, the totals are ninety-six and eighty-nine, respectively. In terms of material exchanges, in 1941–42 Japan shipped 104,233 tons to Germany, of which 19,200 were lost; in 1942–43 half the 104,700 tons shipped was lost. Of the goods shipped in both directions by submarines, only between 20 and 40 percent ever arrived. While the Germans were anxious for deliveries of rubber and precious metals, the Japanese requested industrial products, technical equipment, and chemical goods.

Part IV consists of a conclusion by Sander-Nagashima.

My criticisms of this superb work are but two. First, the fact that it has four authors writing separate sections has resulted in a good deal of overlap, retelling various aspects of the story. Second, the title does not do the book justice; it was hardly a “reluctant” alliance but rather a hollow, empty, or wasted one.

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During the early evening hours of 22 May 1941, the German battleship Bismarck departed Bergen, Norway, to face the might of the Royal Navy with only the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen in company. It was to be the battleship’s first and only operational deployment. Five days later, the ship went down with over a thousand of its crew.

Considered then to be the world’s most powerful battleship, Bismarck entered the Atlantic when Britain was stretched almost to the breaking point. With the critical Battle of the Atlantic hanging in the balance, the pursuit and sinking of Bismarck was one of the war’s most dramatic episodes; many books and a movie were dedicated to it. Those early works, written mostly within twenty years after the war, focused almost entirely on the operation itself. None devoted attention to the strategies, political aspects, or operational and politico-strategic backgrounds that shaped the battleship’s deployment and the Allied responses to it. That void has now been filled by the two books under review, The Destruction of the Bismarck, by Holger Herwig and David Bercuson, and The Loss of the Bismarck: An Avoidable Disaster, by Graham Rhys-Jones. Both books bring new information and fresh perspectives to the tale, putting Bismarck’s operation in its strategic context. In doing so, the authors highlight the strategic impact of the potential outcomes of Operation RHINE, the code name for Bismarck’s