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The Destruction of the Bismarck; The Loss of the Bismarck: An Avoidable Disaster

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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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Herwig, Holger H., and David J. Bercuson. *The Destruction of the Bismarck*. Overlook, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 2001. 314pp. \$35

Rhys-Jones, Graham. *The Loss of the Bismarck: An Avoidable Disaster*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2000. 272pp. \$32.95

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*

sortie. Perhaps more importantly, these books expose the domestic political, the operational, and the military-strategic considerations that drove much of the protagonists' decision making. The books, however, differ in their approaches.

Holger H. Herwig and David J. Bercuson are prominent, widely published historians who coauthored an earlier book on an Atlantic Ocean engagement in World War II. Prior to their recent collaborations, they had specialized in German naval history and Canadian military history, respectively. Both live and teach in Canada, and for the most part they write from a western Atlantic perspective; as a result they have incorporated U.S. planning and activities related to *Bismarck's* deployment and how U.S. naval operations affected the planning of the German navy's commander, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder—a heretofore unexplored topic. They also provide detailed, comprehensive treatment of the domestic political considerations behind Raeder's thinking and the staff's response to his direction and requirements, recounting the German naval staff's extensive objections to Operation RHINE, its timing, and the results of their predeployment gaming of the operation. The book then shifts to a lively but traditional narrative of the battleship's deployment and loss.

The Loss of the Bismarck takes a more Euro-centric view of the battleship's deployment, focusing on the overall Anglo-German strategic picture, with special emphasis on Russia and the Mediterranean. Moreover, it presents the pursuit and engagement of *Bismarck* from a naval command perspective, highlighting the operational picture, available to the commanders on both sides. The contending naval doctrines and missions are explained and provide context to the

decisions made and executed at the time. The book reflects the background of its author, Graham Rhys-Jones, a retired Royal Navy officer whose career spanned from ship's operations to strategic naval planning. He is not without academic credentials, however, for he both attended and taught at the U.S. Naval War College. (See Graham Rhys-Jones's "The Loss of the *Bismarck*: Who Was to Blame?" in the Winter 1992 issue of this journal.) His combined academic, planning, and operational background enables him to provide an operational context for the battleship's destruction. More importantly, he demonstrates how Germany's and Britain's lessons learned in previous twentieth-century naval operations shaped their actions in and responses to Operation RHINE.

The Loss of the Bismarck contends that Admiral Raeder was a man totally wedded to the idea of major surface combatants operating as "raiders," attacking an enemy's ocean commerce. Raeder's naval vision called for "surface raiding groups" operating on the high seas, powerful enough to overwhelm most convoy escorts but fast enough to escape fleet engagements. The two-ship *Bismarck* class was to be Germany's initial post-World War I class of battleships; the *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* were designed with the raiding mission in mind. These ships were fast and powerful and had a long cruising range but were of a design that essentially represented an update of late World War I practices. The never-built follow-on H class was to have been the primary class of German battleships, optimized for raiding operations against the full range of modern naval threats. Unfortunately for Admiral Raeder, the war started too soon for his dream battleships to be

built, and the war's early operations found the much cheaper U-boats enjoying far more success at commerce raiding than his surface ships. He saw the prospects for his "surface raiding groups" retreating into the background. This feeling was reinforced in 1941 by the need to transfer nearly half of his carefully husbanded fuel reserves to the German army for the invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece and the planned invasion of the Soviet Union, as well as the sudden requirement to supply fuel to the oil-starved Italian navy. His hopes were revived, however, in late March 1941 when Vice Admiral Gunther Lütjens returned from Operation BERLIN, a surface-raiding sortie involving the two battle cruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* that destroyed over 115,000 tons of British shipping. Emboldened by Lütjens's success and believing that the future of his surface ships was at stake, Raeder ordered an almost immediate *Bismarck* deployment, despite his staff's and Lütjens's objections and the lack of supporting forces. From that point, Rhys-Jones depicts the operational picture available to the respective commanders, from Britain's Commander in Chief Home Fleet, Admiral John Tovey, and Admiral Raeder down their chains of command to the commanders at the scene. What follows is a chess game in which the reader sees what the commanders saw, and (unlike in previously published books) understands why those commanders acted as they did and how those actions affected the overall operation. It is a revealing and fascinating look into the fog of naval war.

Thus the reasons for the decisions of Admiral Lancelot Ernest Holland aboard HMS *Hood* become more apparent, as

do the tactical and operational impacts of those decisions on the other players, such as Admiral William Wake-Walker aboard the cruiser HMS *Norfolk*, trailing the *Bismarck* and *Prinz Eugen*. Britain's naval operations and heavy losses around Crete, the German invasion of which was under way concurrently with Operation RHINE, were weighing heavily on British commanders. They could not afford a mistake in either the Mediterranean or the Atlantic. German decision making was hampered by inconsistent and unintegrated intelligence support, and it was inhibited by a complex naval command structure in which Vice Admiral Lütjens worked for no less than three admirals in seven days—Admiral Raeder and Admiral Saalwächter, who coordinated operations in the Atlantic, and Admiral Carls, who was responsible for naval operations in the North and Norwegian Seas. Neither country's navy executed its respective intentions perfectly, but postoperational analysis indicates that the British had at least learned their World War I lessons better. They also then applied the lessons of Operation RHINE more effectively to their post-1941 operations.

Both books provide an insightful, balanced, and fascinatingly fresh treatment of a well reported naval event, and they complement each other well. In addition to the revelations discussed above, both expose design and equipment problems that reduced *Bismarck's* readiness and combat effectiveness, but *Loss of the Bismarck* does better with the faults of British ship designs. Both show how ULTRA contributed indirectly to *Bismarck's* destruction, but once again Rhys-Jones applies the naval context better; more importantly, he presents the German intelligence picture, highlighting the

impact of Germany's failure to integrate its intelligence. However, Rhys-Jones all but ignores America's involvement and fails to include much of the German materials that detail the political factors driving Admiral Raeder and explain the naval staff's objections to executing Operation RHINE in May 1941. Neither book tells the story completely; but if one must choose, *The Loss of the Bismarck* provides a better naval story, while *The Destruction of the Bismarck* provides the better strategic treatment.

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Strachan, Hew. *The First World War: To Arms*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001. 1,127pp. \$39.95

What began as a single-volume replacement of Oxford University Press's long-running World War I survey (*A History of the Great War*, by C. R. M. F. Cruttwell [1934]) has, in Hew Strachan's hands, burgeoned into three mammoth volumes, of which this is the first. The second, we are told, will cover the years 1915 and 1916 and will be called *No Quarter*. The third and final volume, entitled *Fall Out* (reader be warned that the first volume has been in the making since 1989), will pick up in the winter of 1916 and push through to the end of the war.

Since this first volume alone runs to 1,127 pages, readers will want to know how this book differs from an already crowded field. The answer is that it looks at topics—origins, war planning, tactics, munitions crises, morale—in a broad

comparative context. No blundering great power is unfairly singled out.

As is obvious from the subtitle, the book is about the origins of the war, mobilization, and opening campaigns. To rephrase what has already been written many times over by battalions of historians is no easy task, but Strachan rises to the challenge. Better yet, he works through all the latest literature in English, French, and German to provide the most up-to-date interpretation of the war's outbreak. In common with most historians, Strachan points to the shakiness of the German Empire and its nervous quest for status and security as the main causes of the war. A chief abettor was Austria-Hungary, whose own military had become so enfeebled by the continuous Vienna-Budapest budget skirmishes that war in 1914 appeared the only way to rally the monarchy behind a much-needed program of rearmament. Similar calculations prevailed in Russia, where the tsar hoped that mobilization in defense of Serbia would heal political wounds and stop a politico-economic strike wave that had escalated from 222 strikes in 1910 to 3,534 in the first half of 1914. France and Great Britain appear more benign; Strachan concludes from the most recent French scholarship that there was no real war fever in France—*révanche* was a slogan of certain pressure groups. Britain was hamstrung between its fleet and "continentalists" clustered around General Henry Wilson.

Strachan's analysis of the competing war plans is excellent. Regarding the Schlieffen Plan, he describes Moltke the Younger's growing unease with the seven-to-one ratio set by Albert von Schlieffen to overweight the "right hook" through Belgium and Holland