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Warship Builders: An Industrial History of U.S. Naval Shipbuilding, 1922–1945,

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BOOK REVIEWS

PREPARATION AND EXECUTION

Warship Builders: An Industrial History of U.S. Naval Shipbuilding, 1922–1945, by Thomas Heinrich. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020. 360 pages. \$39.95.

Challenging conventional narratives is a fundamental part of historical research if we are to advance our understanding of the past. In this spirit, Thomas Heinrich (Baruch College, City University of New York) questions the established interpretation of U.S. war mobilization in World War II in his volume *Warship Builders: An Industrial History of U.S. Naval Shipbuilding, 1922–1945*. Through a well-researched study of American shipbuilding between the 1920s and 1940s, Heinrich, a naval historian and business professor, demonstrates how the private-driven-mobilization theory fails to describe fully the reality of the naval shipbuilding industry and the reasons for its success during World War II.

Instead of carrying out a massive wartime conversion at the beginning of the 1940s, private naval yards used the benefits of the federal investments of the 1930s and the construction experience gained thereby to enable them to churn out a winning two-ocean fleet. Indeed, by its nature the shipbuilding industry did not require adoption of standard Fordist practices, such as task simplification and design freeze, to deliver top-notch vessels. Rather, naval constructors relied

on batch formats, flexible specialization, disintegrated production, and skilled labor to meet the Navy's construction standards. Most importantly, these practices were well suited to producing a variety of warships—a flexibility that eventually proved crucial to providing an effective naval force to deploy against the Axis. As the war demonstrated, not only was a massive naval force indispensable, but its composition also required naval constructors to develop industrial practices that could meet the necessary high degree of specialization and flexibility and match the diverse strategic requirements of the Navy.

The market fluctuations of the interwar years also contributed to bringing naval shipbuilders up to the challenge. After World War I, the Washington Naval Treaty (1922) and its subsequent London updates (1930 and 1936) curbed naval ship output by imposing severe restrictions on the numbers of combatants per signatory and the permitted tonnage of cruisers, destroyers, and submarines, which temporarily turned private builders' attention to merchant ships as their top product. When the Great Depression hit, however, private

yards saw this second-best demand for commercial vessels plummet. To navigate the rough waters of the remaining interwar years, private yard owners, whose ranks already embraced few if any thriving producers in the industry, avoided bankruptcy by resorting to anticompetitive practices such as cartelizing federal contracts. While Congress looked askance at the practice, cartelization brought about structural benefits for private yards, which eventually set the foundations for the slow recovery of the industry in the 1930s and the wartime boom of the 1940s.

The federal government, whose role Heinrich details precisely in his book, was the determinant of the steady progression of the national naval industry out of the quicksand of the interwar years. Chapter 1 discusses how the Roosevelt administration not only used the maritime industrial sector as a vehicle to curb high unemployment rates among individual workers but also played a crucial role in financing the progressive recovery of the private yards as industrial entities. Therefore, when France fell in 1940 and war struck the United States a year and a half later, naval shipbuilders were ready to meet the challenge of large-scale production; eventually they outpaced the combined output of both allies and foes (chapters 3–4). However, this “miraculous” war mobilization was possible only because private yards had acquired essential production skills over the interwar period and the federal government had supported the industry through the Great Depression. Thus, as Heinrich points out, a narrative restricted to private-driven conversion fails to explain thoroughly how the interplay of private and public actors drove America into the leading role in naval industrial output.

A few strong points in the volume make a case for Heinrich’s narrative to become the new convention for understanding how American industrial might won World War II. First, the book clearly describes how public and private actors played intertwined roles in creating a winning two-ocean navy. This analysis begins with thorough explanations of interwar naval technology in chapter 2 and industrial management in chapters 4 and 5.

Another positive element of *Warship Builders* is Heinrich’s ability to articulate his argument from various historical perspectives, and ultimately to offer a complete narrative of how economic, military, political, and technological factors contributed to the establishment and triumph of American sea power. Throughout the volume, Heinrich consistently draws links among these elements, delivering a meticulous account of the concerted endeavor of private enterprises and the federal government behind the American naval effort in World War II. In this respect, Heinrich is highly successful at puzzling together all the information relevant to his revisionist narrative of American war mobilization without losing the balance among different angles of analysis.

A third excellent element of the book is the persistent inclusion throughout the volume of accounts of American allies’ and foes’ industrial practices and shipbuilding choices. Every comparative description validates Heinrich’s thesis and provides each chapter with a decisive edge of analysis.

Perhaps the only improvement that could upgrade the book from a contemporary classic to a timeless masterpiece would be adding more observations that underscore the strategic implications of

shipbuilding policies. Although major strategic effects of each country's naval industrial production are presented clearly—especially for the Americans—some interesting insights on technology, industrial procedures, and maritime strategy remain between the lines.

In conclusion, *Warship Builders* is a much-needed and groundbreaking volume about the most staggering industrial conversion in American, indeed world, history. With outstanding attention to detail and a pleasantly precise style, Heinrich tackles fundamental inconsistencies in the conventional narrative and provides an authoritative description of the intersections between private and public sectors in the American wartime economy during World War II. Lastly, Heinrich's study of American shipbuilding in the interwar years highlights how crucial forward-thinking strategy and industrial planning are when preparing for a possible great-power conflict against insidious naval competitors. In this respect, Heinrich's contribution also offers food for thought to maritime historians and analysts as they examine America's competitors' current maritime buildups.

ANNA MATILDE BASSOLI



A Game of Birds and Wolves: The Secret Game That Won the War, by Simon Parkin. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019. 310 pages. \$29.

During the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II, almost three thousand Allied merchant ships and warships succumbed to U-boats under the command of Admiral Karl Dönitz. Journalist and games writer Simon Parkin presents the story of a top secret unit established in Liverpool at the Western Approaches

Command headquarters during the height of the Battle of the Atlantic.

Recounting the history and work of this unit—the Western Approaches Tactical Unit (WATU), created by Winston Churchill in 1942—Parkin explores the role of war games in British efforts to defeat U-boat operations against Allied shipping. WATU was led by Commander (later Captain) Gilbert H. Roberts, RN, who had been recalled to service following medical retirement for tuberculosis in 1938, and was staffed largely by members of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS, known as “Wrens”). In a flowing narrative, Parkin recounts the background to and development of a war game pitting convoy escorts against U-boats. Designed as a training exercise for convoy-escort officers, its lessons were operationalized readily (p. 143).

The game was laid out on the top floor of Derby House in Liverpool. Staffed by Roberts and a total of sixty-six Wrens from 1942 to 1945, the game was used to show escort officers from many Allied nations what Roberts considered the best way to be sure of sighting U-boats trying to get into the midst of the convoy. Once it was fully developed, the course or war game took six days to complete, and about fifty officers per course participated. Courses were held every week from February 1942 to the end of July 1945—more than 130 games or courses and five thousand participants by war's end (p. 264). The “birds” in the book title references British slang for women, the Wrens in particular; the “wolves” were the U-boats, along with their captains and crews, that frequently operated in groups or packs (i.e., “wolf packs”). That tactic—known as *Die Rudeltaktik*—had been tried and abandoned early in the