

Book Review

The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II
(Evan Mawdsley, Yale University Press, United States, 2019, 600)

Reviewed by: *Abdul Majid Awan**

‘The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II’ is written by Professor Evan Mawdsley on the events and happenings of WWII, with its major focus on the maritime domain. The book describes the importance and critical role of maritime power played during the global war. As the writer had been a military history student and teacher throughout his life, with his expertise on Soviet military history, this book clearly demonstrates a comprehensive analysis of naval warfare. The book emphasises the importance and centrality of maritime ascendancy in determining the outcome of WWII. The book covers wide-ranging events and naval operations across all theatres of war in a cohesive manner while keeping them within the broader context of political and military dimensions. The book is divided into five parts, wherein each part illustrates a distinct phase or era of WWII.

The book begins with describing the importance of sea power, which gives power to use the seas for one’s own purposes and deprives the enemy of its use. WWII commenced with the European War (1939–1940), with initial naval confrontations between Britain and France against Germany; the German invasions of Northern Europe (including Norway and Denmark) and the fall of France in June 1940, which ended the first period of war. It was the time of stalemate between Britain and Germany, where neither was able to knock the other out of war. At that time period, the British Army was weak in comparison to the Germans; however, British sea power protected them from invasion. This ultimately led to the commencement of the Battle of the Atlantic, where tonnage warfare remained effective.

The second era (June 1940–April 1942), although the longest period of WWII, remained the most threatening period for the British. Germans utilised the forward naval bases in western France and Norway. Italy also entered the war on the Axis side and waged offensive war on land and sea in the Mediterranean. However, Sea Power gave Britain the ability to protect its vital supply lines to North America, fight overseas campaigns in North Africa and cause huge losses to Axis navies. Japan also moved from hostile neutrality to active enmity against Allied forces in late 1941. Japan conducted a meticulously planned surprise attack on the US base at Pearl Harbour. Russia and the US joined the war in June and December 1941 respectively and became British allies. Therefore, maritime war was then changed from a European to a global

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one. The Britain faced a heavy blow in Southeast Asia. Thus, the Royal Navy lost its Eastern Fleet, enabling the Japanese Navy to contest control of the Indian Ocean.

The third era (April-December 1942) is the shortest period of WWII but the most dramatic. Axis forces started territorial expansion in Europe and Asia. This marked the beginning of a truly global maritime conflict. Axis forces were for the first time with a powerful seagoing fleet, wherein the Japanese Navy was far more superior than their German and Italian friends. However, the US inflicted damage on the Japanese Navy at Coral Sea, Midway and Guadalcanal. Britain remained able to maintain their global SLOCs in the face of the German U-boat threat. Here, North American shipyards played a pivotal role with the production and repair/maintenance of Allied merchants as well as the naval fleet. Therefore, by the end of 1942, Allied fleet tonnage remained effective and did not fall against losses.

Moreover, Allied forces also carried out successful amphibious operations in the Mediterranean and Pacific. Operation TORCH is considered a notable amphibious operation, wherein combined US and British forces conducted a successful assault on Algeria and Morocco in North Africa. The fourth era (January 1943 – June 1944) is an 18-month period where the US and Royal navies consolidated their naval power and ultimately won the maritime war. The military/naval arsenal of Allied forces continued to strengthen, with an increase in warships, merchant fleets, amphibious forces, submarines and aircraft. The US Navy in particular heightened its naval power with its warships and aircraft rapidly surpassing all other stakeholders in the war. In the Mediterranean, the Royal Navy mounted a heavy blow against the Italian Navy and led them to surrender in Sep 1943, while in the Pacific theatre, the IJN lost to the US Navy in the Philippines Sea in June 1944.

The fifth era (June 1944 to August 1945) is the last year of the global war. In this phase of the war, Allied forces enjoyed command of the sea and defeated Axis forces in all theatres. During this period, Allied expeditionary forces were mobilised across the Atlantic into Northwestern Europe to completely destroy German forces. Therein, Normandy landings were also successfully conducted to retake France. Japan also surrendered to US forces, and its bases across the western Pacific were also captured. The Allied forces demonstrated their supreme sea power with a gradual increase of their means and resources, ultimately leading to a decisive victory to culminate WWII in their favour. The framework of the book revolves around WWII, the success story of Britain and its allies through possession of maritime power.

The best part of the book is that it is written in a chronological order of WWII, narrating events in a coherent manner. The central idea of the book is the dominance at sea and acquisition of sea power to lead the state into victory. It is the role of maritime powers which played a pivotal role in determining the outcomes of the global war. The book entails several background factors, national-level strategies, capabilities, limitations and traditions of navies of that time; past experiences of the navies; leaders' roles in taking complex decisions and resulting in shaping varying outcomes; inter-service rivalries within a country; overall technical and technological competition; and

the importance of intelligence and logistics support that ultimately shaped the outcomes of the battles, campaigns and the overall war. One of the positive aspects is that the author first narrate the events that happened at both ends and then analyses the options available to both sides. For example, the 'Hitler Halt order' given on pages 50-51 has been explained, and then an analysis has been undertaken with respect to options available with Hitler.

The book has sequentially described different theatres of war, iterative campaigns, varying spectrums of conflicts and then the fates of different navies, such as the French Navy, Italian Navy, Soviets, the advent of the US Navy, the revival of the British Navy and the superannuation of the German and Japanese navies. The worst part of the book is clearly evident from the onset of the book, which seems to be a description of Britain only, as it is depicting Britain's narrative, written from an Allied point of view, encompassing critique and suggestions primarily for Allied. Moreover, Axis forces are termed as 'enemy' throughout the book, while words like 'Fascist Italy', 'Imperial Japan', 'Revisionist powers' (Italy and Japan), and 'Nazi Germany' have been used throughout. However, Britain is termed as 'British power' and not as 'Colonialist Britain', etc. The Dunkirk evacuation is usually renowned as a catastrophic evacuation for Allied forces, with heavy losses both on land and at sea.

Germans sustained in war for six years; therefore, the author could have given some credit to them as well. For example, 'Pack tactics' or 'Rudeltaktik' by U-boats, as mentioned on page 89, was a complete success during the Battle of Atlantic in the European theatre. However, German successes have also been negated by finding small weaknesses in their tactics (which even a general reader could find irrelevant). As U-Boats inflicted heavy losses to Allied shipping, however, while summarising Part II on page 196, the writer diminishes the value of U-Boats by citing that 'only a few U-Boats were available from 1940 to 1942 to seriously endanger the main Atlantic route.' On the contrary, losses inflicted to Allied shipping by U-boats were high, as evident on page 92.

The planning process, actions and rationale of Axis forces were not much deliberated, whereas their responsive actions to Allied offensives have been much deliberated. The importance of the shore-based aviation has also been emphasised, highlighting that even if they are limited in numbers and anti-shipping capability as well. This was demonstrated during the German campaign off Norway, where shore-based aircraft could limit the movement of the large British fleet. As WWII was a historical war that lasted for six years in multiple theatres, by multiple nations and across all domains of warfare, it therefore remains highly challenging to assimilate the events. Therefore, maps, diagrams and figures along the text could give better understanding of the matter. For instance, maps and figures on page 126 could have provided a more comprehensive explanation of the sea routes available to Axis forces in North Africa. Few key terms, like 'Danzig crisis' or 'Twilight War' coined by Winston Churchill, have not been explained in the book, even though a complete chapter is written on them.

Nevertheless, *The War for the Seas: A Maritime History of World War II* is one of the finest collections of history of WWII, narrating events primarily encompassing the maritime domain from across the theatres of the war. It represents a comprehensive and detailed interpretation of naval operations that occurred during the global war. The book amicably covers the political dimension of the war, strategic analysis of the events, military/naval developments across various theatres and technological innovations that occurred over that period. Overall, the book is a good read for scholars of military history and WWII, but above all, each and every naval officer across the globe must go through this book to better develop their understanding of WWII and strengthen their analytical and critical thinking to be used in their naval careers.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.