



From Versailles to Mers el-Kébir: The Promise of Anglo-French Naval Cooperation, 1919–40 by George E. Melton.

Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2015. Pp. xiii, 264. ISBN 978–1–61251–879–4.

Review by Paul W. Doerr, Acadia University (paul.doerr@acadiau.ca).

This book focuses on the intricate, fascinating, and ultimately tragic relationship between the British Royal Navy and the French *Marine Nationale*, and their respective governments, from the end of the First World War to the disaster at Mers el-Kébir in 1940. Historian George Melton (St. Andrews Univ., North Carolina), a specialist in French naval and diplomatic history, has previously written a revisionist biography of Adm. Jean François Darlan, who plays a pivotal role in this book as well.¹ At the battle at Mers el-Kébir (3 July 1940), near Oran in Algeria, 1,297 French sailors died when British warships commanded by Adm. James Somerville unexpectedly bombarded French ships at their anchorages. This has remained an episode of bitter memory in Anglo-French relations ever since. Melton's sympathies throughout are squarely with the French.

The author draws heavily on French naval archives at Vincennes, British Admiralty records and cabinet papers, and private and published memoirs.² A better familiarity with the UK Foreign Office files might have mitigated some of his harsher judgments of British actions. Melton seems unaware of recent, very pertinent secondary sources.³ Nor does he make any explicit claim for the originality of his interpretations and conclusions.

Written in a solid, workmanlike prose style, the book comprises thirteen chapters and a conclusion. Melton's explanation of the impact of the Washington Naval Treaty of 1923 on British and French naval strategy is outstanding. He carefully locates all the events and decisions he discusses in a global context. Nonetheless, there are some minor flaws, including repetition of specific points and issues and even phraseology. He sometimes belabors the obvious. The volume's production values are excellent (sturdy binding, high-quality paper) and a half-dozen pages of excellent black-and-white photographs are a welcome enhancement.

Melton starts with a (sometimes too) succinct tour of the 1920s and early 1930s. He overstates the threat posed by the emergence of Germany's *Panzerschiff* battleships in the early 1930s, but this is a quibble. More irksome is his exaggeration of the weaknesses of the Royal Navy, which seems to verge on ignominious collapse throughout much of the book.

Although the senior staffs of the Royal Navy and *Marine Nationale* often cooperated to good effect in the period under consideration, Britain and France had fundamentally divergent strategic interests. In terms of naval power, Melton writes, the French were preoccupied with the Mediterranean and Italy's growing *Regia Marina* (royal navy) and accordingly built ships specifically for service in that theater. Admiral Darlan, commander in chief of the French fleet, wrote off the French empire in Asia as

1. *Darlan: Admiral and Statesman of France, 1881–1942* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998).

2. Curiously, he still refers to the "Public Record Office," which was redesignated the "UK National Archives" in 2003, after the reorganization of the country's archival system.

3. E.g., David Brown, *The Road to Oran: Anglo-French Naval Relations, September 1939–July 1940* (NY: Routledge, 2004), and P.M.H. Bell, *France and Britain, 1900–1940: Entente and Estrangement* (NY: Routledge, 2014).

indefensible against incursions by the Japanese. Britain, by contrast, could make no such concession and continued to think of itself as a global power; this raised the daunting prospect of simultaneously fighting three enemies—Germany, Italy, and Japan. British grand strategy focused, therefore, on diplomatic appeasement of Italy, while the French were more inclined to fight. This divergence of interests became apparent during the Nyon Conference (10–14 Sept. 1937).

Spring and early summer 1937 saw mysterious submarine “pirate” attacks on international shipping in the Mediterranean. An attempt to torpedo the destroyer HMS *Havock* outraged the British public, which blamed Benito Mussolini. The Fascist dictator had already extended massive military aid to his Spanish counterpart Francisco Franco, then seeking to overthrow the democratically elected government of the Spanish Republic. Adolf Hitler was aiding Franco. Only the Soviet Union offered the Republic any support. All this violated the policy of non-intervention favored by the French and British, who hoped to isolate the crisis. The piracy campaign was thus seen as the latest in a series of Fascist provocations.

British foreign secretary Anthony Eden, with his French counterpart Yvon Delbos, acting while Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was on holiday, quickly arranged a conference of Mediterranean powers at Nyon, Switzerland. The decision taken there by the British and French to deploy destroyers to patrol the Mediterranean brought an end to the submarine attacks. Melton clarifies with fascinating detail the measures the British and French took to base and supply their vessels during this notable instance of naval cooperation between the two countries. He also highlights the forgotten role of the smaller powers at Nyon, especially Yugoslavia and Greece. Though both states wanted to contain Italian power, they feared retaliation and realized the British and French could offer only limited assistance. Alas, the aspirations of Nyon proved to be a mirage, and the British still preferred bringing Mussolini to heel by negotiation and diplomacy, once the piracy had abated.

In tracing the descent into war, the author sometimes veers into counterfactual history. He regards the abandonment of appeasement after Hitler’s occupation of Prague (March 1939) as a serious strategic error, ignoring the more nuanced conclusions reached in recent scholarship on appeasement.⁴ Yes, the guarantee to Poland also buffered the USSR, but the British public simply could not stomach further appeasement and the balance of power on the continent was out of kilter. Melton seems confident that the British and French could have provoked the Italians into war in 1939 and then quickly defeated them; having secured the Mediterranean, British naval power could then have been redeployed in the Pacific. A plausible but utterly speculative scenario.

Anglo-French naval collaboration peaked in the early months of the Second World War. Melton usefully reminds us that, until the *King George V*-class battleships came into service, the French possessed the heavy units best able to deal with German commerce raiders. British naval forces receive all the credit for running down KMS *Admiral Graf Spee* (Dec. 1939), but French vessels were equally important in narrowing the German raider’s options. Melton likewise stresses the substantial French contribution to the doomed Norwegian campaign of 1940.

In Melton’s view, the British did very little right. Their worst mistake, he suggests, was the attack at Mers el-Kébir. He characterizes Churchill as obsessive and secretive, and alleges (on thin evidence) that he withheld key information from the War Cabinet, information that might have negated the need for the attack on the French fleet. He believes Churchill deceived the House of Commons and the British public. By contrast, Darlan is cast as rather a well intentioned fellow with the true interests of

4. See, e.g., Gaynor Johnson, ed., *The Foreign Office and British Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (NY: Routledge, 2005), and Paul Doerr, *British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (NY: Manchester U Pr, 1998).

France at heart, whose reputation was besmirched by Churchill's postwar campaign of character assassination.

Melton is more persuasive in assessing the strategic results of the British attack. The *Dunkerque* was damaged, not destroyed, and the *Strasbourg* escaped to Toulon, where it headed a formidable force of cruisers, destroyers, and some seventy-odd submarines. Meanwhile the *Richelieu* and the incomplete *Jean Bart* escaped destruction at Dakar and Casablanca, respectively. Melton concludes that Mers el-Kébir actually worsened Britain's strategic situation. Fortunately, nothing came of the potential threat from the Vichy navy.

British motivations are given short shrift here. In a state of shock and dismay following the French defeat on land, Britain was facing imminent invasion and a seemingly unstoppable German offensive. Stunned and enraged by the actions of Marshal Pétain and Admiral Darlan, the British could not have been expected to act differently in such a crisis.

From Versailles to Mers el-Kébir will appeal most strongly to specialists, especially for its acute insights into Anglo-French naval relations during the interwar period. But its author's analysis of Mers el-Kébir should be approached with due skepticism and checked against the findings of other historians.