



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power

Author(s): Paul Kennedy

Source: *The International History Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Feb., 1988), pp. 2-17

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40107086>

Accessed: 24-05-2020 09:49 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The International History Review*

The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power

IT MUST BE almost exactly a century ago that Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, United States Navy, was drafting and redrafting the chapters of what would become one of the most significant and enduring books on international affairs: *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (first edition, Boston, 1890). Extolled by presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt and by emperors such as Wilhelm II, quoted (sometimes even read) by admirals and navy leagues everywhere, translated into numerous languages, used as a textbook by naval and military colleges across the globe, and appearing in over forty editions, it is one of the few non-fiction works of 1890 – perhaps the only one? – that is still available (and in paperback) today. Purely in terms of popularity of its message, it has outstayed all comparable ‘seminal’ books about world politics, including those by such authors as Seeley, Mackinder, Treitschke, and Brooks Adams.¹

The attention immediately accorded to Mahan’s work, and the continued popularity of it, was not because its author had made a revolutionary new discovery that challenged prevailing wisdom. As many scholars have pointed out, Mahan’s conclusions about the historical significance of sea power were similar to those being advanced at the time by Sir John Laughton and the Colomb brothers – particularly Philip Colomb’s *Naval Warfare* – and echoed the ‘lessons’ preached centuries earlier by English writers such as Francis Bacon, Raleigh, Halifax, and Bolingbroke. If Mahan’s style was superior to Colomb’s, he was ‘not strikingly gifted’ as a prose writer,² and the greater part of

¹ These various works are analysed in H. Gollwitzer, *Geschichte des weltpolitischen Denkens*, Volume II: *Zeitalter des Imperialismus und der Weltkriege* (Göttingen, 1982).

² D.M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought 1867-1914* (London, 1965), p. 80. See also the opinion in W.E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power* (Norman, Okla., 1981), pp. 34-7.

his three³ *Influence* books consists of very detailed accounts of naval campaigns. Where he was gifted was in explicating many of the *implicit* conclusions of other naval authorities and putting them in a form especially suited to the late nineteenth-century positivistic mind-set, with its eagerness to accept 'general principles'. Like Marx for political economy, and Spencer for sociology, Mahan strove to be 'scientific' and to discover those 'considerations and principles [which] belong to the unchangeable, or unchanging, order of things, remaining the same, in cause and effect, from age to age'.⁴ Like Marx and Spencer, although with rather more doubts and reservations,⁵ Mahan also came to believe that he had uncovered 'immutable' laws and principles which would always underpin the study of his subject.

The basic tenets of Mahanian thought – assembled chiefly in Chapter One of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783* under the title 'Discussion of the Elements of Sea Power' – are well enough known to need only a brief summary here.⁶ By the use of numerous historical examples, Mahan sought to demonstrate that international struggles since classical times were often greatly affected by command of the sea in wartime; and that, in peacetime, 'sea commerce' was of profound influence upon the wealth and strength of nations. Since, as he put it, 'travel and traffic by water have always been easier and cheaper than by land', it followed that any nation able to control the 'wide common' across which the vital maritime trade-routes passed would gain enormous benefits: its trade would be protected, its links overseas would be maintained, and its troops would pass freely to desired destinations. Conversely, a country which in wartime lost command of the sea would suffer both militarily and commercially, probably to the extent of being unable to continue the struggle.

Securing sea control was no easy task. It required the construction and deployment of a battlefleet strong enough to defeat the enemy's. In Mahan's words, it implied 'the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive; and which, by controlling the great common, closes

³ That is, not only *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*, but the later works, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire* (2 vols., London, 1982), and *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* (2 vols., London, 1905).

⁴ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History* (repr. London, 1965), p. 88.

⁵ Schurman, *The Education of a Navy*, pp. 72-3, explores Mahan's hesitations about laws and principles.

⁶ Apart from Livezey and Schurman, see also the discussion by P.A. Crowl, 'Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian', in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. P. Paret (2nd ed., Princeton, 1986), pp. 444-77.

the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy's shores'.⁷ By comparison, a strategy of *guerre de course*, while probably leading to the capture of some of the enemy's merchant-ships, could never itself bring command of the sea. In much the same way, a merely regional maritime superiority (say, in the Baltic, or western Mediterranean) would vanish as soon as a preponderant battlefleet arrived in those waters to drive the local squadrons into their harbours. Sea power, in Mahan's view, was pervasive wherever large warships could operate; it also tended to be monopolistic.

Very few nations, then, could achieve true sea power; many more had sought that goal, and failed. The prospects of success were heavily dependent upon what Mahan described as the six 'principal conditions affecting the sea power of nations':⁸ geographical position; physical conformation; extent of territory; number of population; national character; and character and policy of governments. Put briefly, Mahan's reading of history taught him that a state that had neither to defend nor to extend itself by land was much more favourably placed to concentrate upon the growth of its sea power than one that had constantly to be prepared against land neighbours; that a well-situated position, flanking important oceanic waterways, provided a further crucial advantage, as did good harbours and a seaboard not too great for a country's defence requirements, and not (like France's seaboard) divided; and that a sparse soil and climate was often an inducement to overseas endeavour, whereas the inhabitants of a richly endowed nation had less inclination to leave home. By number of population, Mahan meant those 'following the sea', both in terms of being engaged in maritime commerce and being readily available to the navy – just as national character referred to a specific proclivity to exploit the sea, as would be the case with a nation of enterprising traders, willing and able to make a sufficient standing investment in naval strength to protect its interests upon the oceans. The government's role was to foster the country's maritime and commercial potential in time of peace and, by the skilful exploitation of sea power in wartime, to secure a victory that would further enhance the country's position in the world when the conflict was over.

It was necessary to emphasize all this, Mahan felt, because of the relative neglect of the maritime dimension in most historical studies; his book was thus offered as a corrective to the prevailing ignorance. Yet it is interesting to note that, on the page following his discourse upon 'The Elements of Sea Power', he willingly admitted the dangers

⁷ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, p. 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–84.

of over-emphasizing the naval aspect: 'Sea history ... is but one factor in that general advance and decay of nations which is called their history; and if sight be lost of the other factors to which it is so closely related, a distorted view, either exaggerated or the reverse, of its importance will be formed.'⁹

Predictably enough, such a caveat was swiftly forgotten (if it was at all comprehended) by a host of more extreme navalist writers and by 'big navy' lobbies in Great Britain, the United States, Germany, and elsewhere who eagerly quoted Mahan's writings as the gospel of sea power during their own political struggles to obtain a larger navy. To the 'blue-water' school of strategy in late-Victorian and Edwardian Great Britain, to Cabot Lodge, Teddy Roosevelt, and other advocates of US expansionism into the Caribbean and the Pacific, and to Tirpitz and the German Navy League, it would have been counter-productive to admit to limitations upon sea power, or to the argument that it was 'but one factor' in the rise and fall of nations. It was scarcely surprising, therefore, that those influential groups entered the First World War, and some even the Second World War, with the firm conviction that 'sea power' in the form of decisive battlefleet actions would determine the outcome of those conflicts.¹⁰

Because of this exaggerated and uncritical claim about sea power's influence, it has been relatively easy for later commentators to point to the flaws in that argument, especially as revealed in the epic global conflicts of the twentieth century. With the rise of two continent-wide Superpowers whose economies, though not very vulnerable to the workings of a maritime blockade, could be mobilized to project their massive national power outwards; with the parallel eclipse of the smaller, peripheral, or island-based states dependent upon overseas trade; with the invention of the submarine which made a *guerre de course* strategy more viable than before; and with the development of newer weapons-systems like the mine, torpedo, submarine, and aircraft, which increasingly challenged and undermined the dominance of the battlefleet: in the light of these newer trends, many historians and strategical commentators have come to feel that the influence of sea power has steadily diminished as this century has unfolded. As Gerald Graham nicely put it: 'It is an interesting commentary upon human affairs that Mahan's exposition of the influence of sea power on the course of European and

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁰ Holger Herwig's article in this edition is proof enough of the German case. For the British and US navies, see the summary in P.M. Kennedy, 'The Relevance of the Pre-War British and American Maritime Strategies to the First World War and its Aftermath', in *Maritime Strategies of Great Powers: Anglo-American Perceptions*, eds. J. Hattendorf and R.S. Jordan, forthcoming.

American expansion should have occurred at the very time when new instruments of the Industrial Revolution were beginning to erode principles and theories upon which his doctrines were based.¹¹

But if the enthusiasts of sea power had exaggerated its promise for the twentieth century, might they not also have claimed too much for earlier centuries as well? Here, too, one has the sense of an increasing 'swing' away from the navalist position. Probably most world historians would concede that 'neither the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Aztec, Chinese, Zulu, Hun, Ottoman or Holy Roman empires, to give but the more obvious examples, derived their strength basically from the sea' and that 'the land has always been more important than the sea in the development of civilization' simply because the greater part of mankind's activities has been concentrated on land.¹²

But even in the specific historical and geographical circumstances from which Mahan and the British navalist school drew their examples – that is, the maritime contests between England and its European rivals from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries – scholars have challenged the notion that sea power's influence was as great as the claims made for it. For the Elizabethan period, Garrett Mattingly and R.B. Wernham have called attention to the *limitations* of maritime force, not only because of the unorganized and amateurish nature of navies at that time, but also because the struggle between the Habsburgs and their enemies for the mastery of Europe took place chiefly on land.¹³ Similarly, in the Nelson era – the favourite historical age for the advocates of sea power – Edward Ingram has roundly attacked fellow academics who cling to the 'mythology' of the blue-water school and fail to comprehend the marginal role played by navies both in determining the downfall of Napoleon and in the 'beginning of the Great Game' in Asia.¹⁴ More generally, Sir Michael Howard has questioned the efficacy of the so-called 'British Way in Warfare' as it was originally argued in Liddell Hart's heavily navalist presentation of

¹¹ G.S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 124.

¹² P.M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London, 1976), p. 7; Crowl, 'Alfred Thayer Mahan', pp. 452-3.

¹³ See R.B. Wernham's important essay on 'Elizabethan War Aims and Strategy', in *Elizabethan Government and Society*, eds. S.T. Bindoff *et al.* (London, 1961), and G. Mattingly, *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (Harmondsworth, 1961), 1959 ed.) for the details, as well as Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, ch. 1.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Edward Ingram, 'Illusion of Victory: The Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar Revisited', *Military Affairs*, xlvii (1984), 140-3; and *In Defense of British India: Great Britain in the Middle East, 1775-1842* (London, 1984), chs. 5, 7.

Great Britain's national policy in the centuries prior to 1914.¹⁵ In consequence, it is the *Continental* rather than the *maritime* aspect of British grand strategy that has received the greater attention in recent historical literature.¹⁶

This further swing in the historiography, if continued, suggests that the danger may soon, or already, be that scholars become too dismissive of the influence of sea power upon history and thus explain away the popularity of Mahan's ideas as being simply due to the heady expectations of that 'age of navalism' which occurred in the two decades prior to the First World War.¹⁷ Yet instead of having to adopt one entrenched position or the other, it surely makes more sense to admit that sea power has had *influence*, and also has had its *limitations*, depending upon the historical and geographical context of the period and war in question. In other words, the influence of sea power is, like so much else in life, relative; and maritime force itself remains, to use Mahan's own words once again, 'but one factor' in the story. A 'distorted view, either exaggerated or the reverse' of the influence of sea power upon history is not conducive to proper, reasoned scholarship.

The articles that follow ought to be read with the above considerations in mind. All were originally given as public lectures at Yale in the Fall semester of 1986 in a series entitled 'Sea Power, Past and Present'.¹⁸ The lecture-series itself was devised to illustrate both the influence and the limitations of sea power, in historical terms, and in the light of the contemporary debate about the US navy's so-called 'maritime strategy'.¹⁹ It was not intended to force things to an overall, tidy conclusion, for the simple reason that circumstances did alter cases; everything depended, as Clausewitz might well have put it, upon the overall situation a nation found itself in. To use the crudest of comparisons, what control of the sea meant to Great Britain and Japan in the Second World War was totally different from what it meant to the Soviet Union, just as, in the sixteenth century, the influence of sea power upon the history of the Ukraine was far less than it was upon the history of Portugal.

* * *

¹⁵ M. Howard, 'The British Way in Warfare: A Reappraisal', which is most easily located on pp. 189-207 of his collection *The Causes of Wars* (London, 1983).

¹⁶ See the analysis of this literature in H. Strachan, 'The British Way in Warfare Revisited', *Historical Journal*, xxvi (1983), 447-61.

¹⁷ Nicely discussed in W.L. Langer, *The Diplomacy of Imperialism 1890-1902* (New York, 1951 ed.), ch. xiii, 'The New Navalism'.

¹⁸ The lecture series was funded by the Robert A. Lovett endowment for Military and Naval History at Yale, to which thanks are expressed.

¹⁹ As presented in 'The Maritime Strategy' Supplement to the January 1986 issue of *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*.

J.R. Jones's summary of Dutch sea power in the seventeenth century provides an excellent example both of 'influence' and 'limitations'. In *commercial-maritime* terms, the United Provinces offered the success story of the age. Dominating the carrying-trade of Europe from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, exploiting the rich herring fisheries close to home as well as the immensely lucrative spice trade in the Indies, Dutch ships, traders, and middlemen were everywhere, and the effect of all this upon the national prosperity was marked. Nevertheless, it remained impossible for the Dutch to translate this degree of commercial power into hard military power when wars occurred (as they so frequently did in that turbulent, mercantilist age). Geography had not only limited the size of the territory and population of the United Provinces, it had also made it extremely difficult to fight against so favourably disposed a country as England, which lay athwart the Dutch sea-routes to the Atlantic and beyond. This caused the three Anglo-Dutch wars to be so much tougher than the earlier struggle for independence against Spain, especially when, as Jones points out, the English began to employ far heavier vessels with many more large-calibre guns, against which the Dutch found it hard to retaliate.

If all this seems to confirm the correctness of the first four of Mahan's 'principal conditions' affecting sea power, the less tangible factors of political culture and governmental system were also in evidence. The peculiarly splintered nature of the five Dutch 'admiralties', the domestic tensions between merchants and aristocrats, and the mean-mannered system of recruiting and paying seamen and rewarding admirals, meant that there was insufficient national coherence to sustain an effective maritime policy during the hazards and setbacks of wartime. The extraordinary efforts of Tromp and de Ruyter could obviate those deficiencies to some degree, but the fact remained that an all-out naval war was always a losing proposition, in the larger sense, for the Dutch. The only consolation, as Jones observes, was that the material effects of these naval conflicts were limited – certainly relative to the 'total' wars of the twentieth century – so that a defeat in one struggle could shortly afterwards be followed by victory in the next. In its way, that conclusion is one of the strongest pointers to the limitations of sea power in this period; nothing ever occurred in the maritime realm to equal the devastation of, say, the Thirty Years War on land.

* * *

It is the essentially 'limited' nature of early-modern warfare which is at the heart of Daniel A. Baugh's spirited defence of the principles which (he holds) guided British grand strategy between the Glorious Revolu-

tion and the downfall of Napoleon. With the exception of the War for American Independence, Great Britain was successful in all her major struggles, which is why those conflicts were the central feature of Mahan's first two *Influence* books and, even more, were the 'model' for Liddell Hart when he looked back admiringly at what he termed 'the British way in warfare'. As already mentioned, that position has come under repeated criticism from historians over the past few decades – which is, one suspects, as much a reflection of the lessons drawn by a post-Second-World-War generation of scholars as Liddell Hart's ideas were a reflection of his own revulsion at the costs of the First World War. Be that as it may, Baugh's article is important as an up-to-date restatement of the older maritime-peripheralist approach to British grand strategy, which he labels here 'blue-water' policy.²⁰

While such a policy was expansionist and aggressive outside Europe, Baugh argues, its chief concern closer to home was the defence of the realm from a European threat, that is, France. Exactly where to contain that threat, and by what means, were the central points at issue, with the early Hanoverian kings and their Whig ministers preferring a substantial 'continental commitment', but with a large part of the body politic (especially the Tories, and the colonial interests) wanting little or no involvement in Europe. The end-result for British sea power was a reasonably coherent one, however, as both schools were agreed in supporting a powerful navy. They could also appreciate the critical importance of trade and finance, not only in sustaining Great Britain's capacity to pay for its own (and allied) troops, but also in providing the very direct means (seamen, shipbuilding supplies) of keeping a large fleet afloat and efficient. All this, together with its natural insularity, meant that Great Britain amply satisfied all of Mahan's six principal conditions affecting sea power.

To these Mahanian prescriptions, Baugh adds two further contextual points. The first is that, while Great Britain always looked for allies in her endeavours to contain France, the eighteenth-century alliance system, so unlike that between NATO and the Warsaw Pact today, was fragile, flexible, and unpredictable, leading to frequent diplomatic *renversements* as well as the accompanying complaints of betrayal. In this situation, an island-state was once again better positioned than a land-girt power, although the connection to Hanover remained a significant constraint upon Great Britain's full freedom of action. Second, all

²⁰ A slightly different use of the term than that employed by the 'blue-water' school of strategy in the late-Victorian debate over the dangers of invasion: see A.J. Marder, *The Anatomy of British Sea Power: A History of British Naval Policy in the Pre-Dreadnought Era, 1880-1905* (Hamden, Conn., 1964 ed.), ch. v.

of these wars were lengthy ones, and expected by British governments to be so; this therefore led to an emphasis upon the husbanding of resources and the protection of national credit, but it also meant that there was little supposition of achieving a 'knock-out blow' and total victory. A limited victory or even (as in 1748) a stalemate in Europe was quite suitable, however, as Great Britain was not so much trying to 'win' as to contain France and, where possible, emerge at the end of the war in a better position than before. Critics of this 'blue-water' policy will no doubt retort that Baugh's description of its limited nature better fits the early-to-mid-eighteenth-century wars than it does the desperate and very bloody campaigning of Marlborough's time, or the fight-to-the-death against Napoleon; which suggests in turn that there may be some danger in describing the entire 1689-1815 period as a 'distinctive system of national security'. And there will be others who detect in this article a Liddell Hartian regret for Great Britain's 1914-15 decision to enter into a full-scale 'continental commitment',²¹ the correctness of which is still being disputed. Nonetheless, all students of British grand strategy stand in debt to Baugh for his reformulation of the traditional claims about 'the influence of sea power upon History'.

* * *

The one eighteenth-century struggle that Great Britain lost (despite a late recovery at sea) was the War for American Independence. In discussing why that was so, Jonathan Dull puts Mahanian views of sea power, in particular the emphasis upon decisive naval battles, in a much wider perspective. The conflict offers, at first sight, an excellent example of the influence of sea power. Because the Royal Navy had been neglected whereas the French navy had been built up in the years prior to their clash, the British lost command of the sea in the Channel at a critical time, and in consequence were unable to prevail in their major campaign overseas. Having learnt this 'lesson' by 1783, however, the British government under William Pitt the Younger made sure that it kept up a powerful naval establishment thereafter, which was why it went into the next war against France in 1793 so much better prepared.

But if that overall picture is reasonably correct, it certainly requires the modifications and corrections which Dull makes to it. In the first place, despite Mahan's general claims about the importance of material factors in implementing a successful naval strategy, there is little in his

²¹ This is made much clearer in Daniel A. Baugh, 'British Strategy during the First World War in the Context of Four Centuries', in *Naval History: The Sixth Symposium of the U.S. Naval Academy*, ed. Daniel M. Masterson (Wilmington, Del., 1987).

own analysis about what turned out to be the two critical elements in the sustaining of this war: that is, the supply of trained seamen available to each side's fleet, and the availability of ready credit to keep up the fighting year after year. Second, although Mahan briefly explains the particular diplomatic conjunctions of 1778-82, he was not very concerned with what, as Dull amply demonstrates,²² was probably the most important variable of all. For Great Britain's diplomatic isolation in Europe, which meant that she could not open up a Continental 'flank' against France, together with Paris's success in allying with a whole combination of west-European states, constrained the British government in a number of ways, not least by forcing it to divert resources to the North Sea, Gibraltar, and Minorca, leaving fewer available to fight the Americans. Yet France, too, was constrained by the package of alliances she had forged (especially that with Spain), and furthermore was not out to eclipse Great Britain, points which may provide a better explanation for her cautious and limited naval campaigning, which Mahan so strongly denounced.²³

Yet even if the British had retained their traditional command of the sea in this war, one is left wondering whether they could have suppressed such a widespread rebellion over three thousand miles away, given the appalling logistical burdens and the nature of irregular colonial warfare. Mahan himself argued that 'the ultimate crushing of the Americans ... not by direct military effort but by exhaustion, was probable, if England were left unmolested to strangle their commerce and industries with her overwhelming naval strength',²⁴ but that begs the question of how vulnerable the American colonists were to a naval blockade. If more than a blockade was required, then it is difficult to disagree with Correlli Barnett's opinion that 'it is probable that to restore British authority in America was a problem beyond the power of military means to resolve, however perfectly applied'.²⁵

Finally, Dull again confirms the relative insignificance of 'defeat' and 'victory' to these eighteenth-century states. The British lost their most important and prosperous colony, which was supposedly a disaster in navalist-mercantilist theory, yet trade with the independent United States soon expanded to be far larger and more profitable, thus strengthening British commerce, shipping, and finances in time for the next war. France and Spain won this round, technically speaking; but

²² See especially his important works on *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), and *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1985).

²³ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, pp. 535-8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 524.

²⁵ C. Barnett, *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970* (London, 1970), p. 225.

little good it did them. Once again, the relationship of 'sea power' to 'history' had turned out to be far more complex than any mere concentration upon admirals and battles alone might suggest.

* * *

'The poor French! They have not read their Mahan!'²⁶ was Kaiser Wilhelm II's famous comment upon the French retreat from the quarrel with Great Britain in the Fashoda crisis of late 1898, when the two powers confronted each other on the Upper Nile, and British sea power prevailed. Given the disastrous record of German policies in the two world wars of this century, the Kaiser's remark bids fair to be one of the most historically ironic statements of the Second Reich's 'world policy', almost on a par with his own Chancellor Bülow's boast that in the coming twentieth century Germany would either be 'the hammer or the anvil'. As Holger Herwig points out in his detailed examination of German naval strategy from 1914 to 1945, both Wilhelm and his state secretary of the navy, Admiral Tirpitz, were pronounced 'Mahanians'. Yet this German desire to dispute and then take over Great Britain's naval mastery was vitiated by an array of practical obstacles. In the first place, Germany's geographical position in comparison with its arch-rival, Great Britain's, was analogous, in many ways, to the difficulties that faced the Dutch in the seventeenth century.

This problem was compounded by the fact that, whereas the official Tirpitzian doctrine emphasized, just as Mahan had, a decisive battle-fleet encounter, the High Seas Fleet was never large enough to sally forth with confidence and take on the Grand Fleet. Germany, as Mahan had observed in his penetrating essay 'Considerations Governing the Dispositions of Navies', could only negate Great Britain's geographical advantage by an 'adequate superiority of numbers';²⁷ but whatever the Fatherland's inclination towards *Weltpolitik* and *Flottenpolitik*, it remained essentially a land power like the France of Louis XIV and Napoleon, and therefore never able to devote sufficient resources to the navy to guarantee it a decent chance in a close-in battle-ship encounter with the much larger Grand Fleet. Perhaps this problem would have been solved had the Royal Navy been rash enough to maintain a close blockade off Helgoland, where it would have been extremely vulnerable to German mines, torpedo-boats, and submarines,

²⁶ Kennedy, *British Naval Mastery*, p. 206.

²⁷ Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations Naval and Political* (London, 1902), pp. 165-6. For a further discussion, see Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870-1945* (London, 1983), ch. v, 'Strategic Aspects of the Anglo-German Naval Race'.

and placed on the tactical defensive. But the very advent of those newer instruments of naval warfare (especially the U-boat) compelled the British admiralty to adopt a distant blockade based upon the Channel and the Orkneys, which totally negated the German waiting strategy. Ironically, the same Royal Navy that had been boosted in its prestige and importance by Mahan's teachings had now elected to adopt a 'Corbettian' policy of controlling the sea lines of communication and avoiding a battlefleet encounter.²⁸

On the other hand, and quite contrary to the suppositions of Tirpitz and his acolytes, it was possible to carry out a devastating *guerre de course* policy against Great Britain, but the instrument of that policy was the U-boat, whose construction Tirpitz had fought against throughout the pre-war years, relenting (only partially) in 1912. This meant that, although the most serious German threat to the Allied 'command of the sea' was posed by submarines, there were never enough of them to be decisive; but their very success compelled a reluctant British admiralty to return to that policy of eighteenth-century trade wars, the convoy. When it was instituted, the last real German chance of winning the First World War was over.

Despite the glaring failure of the Tirpitzian strategy, German naval policy under his later successor Erich Raeder was not very different. To begin with, Raeder was a Tirpitz pupil, in that (despite having written the German official naval history of cruiser warfare in overseas waters during the First World War) he deprecated the *guerre de course* and clung to the battlefleet concept. Second, although Raeder and the rest of the naval establishment had insisted throughout the 1930s that they were *not* planning to engage the Royal Navy, the very thrust of Nazi expansionism – not to mention the natural ambition of creating an oceanic rather than a local fleet – implied that they would sooner or later confront the same dilemma as had faced the German admirals of 1914: that is, how to carry out an aggressive maritime policy against a superior fleet located across the North Sea. In Raeder's case, this numerical superiority was to be transformed by the fantastically ambitious 'Z' plan, which, even if the resources had been available to implement it, would not have produced a substantial fleet until 1945 or 1950. As it turned out, Hitler could not wait that long, and Raeder's surface navy was left in 1939 with the awkward choice, as Raeder fully realized, of dying gallantly against superior odds, or remaining in harbour. Even the more advantageous geostrategical position Germany had acquired by the conquest of Norway and France in 1940, could not outweigh

²⁸ Kennedy, 'Pre-War British and American Maritime Strategies', *passim*.

this fundamental imbalance. Effective sea power, in the Mahanian view, required both fleet and position; position alone was insufficient. Nor was a fleet of any considerable size to be provided by a nation that remained essentially a land power, where the greater part of the defence budget was devoted to the army and, additionally, to the *Luftwaffe*. In the struggle for the 'Heartland' of Eurasia, to use the terminology of Mackinder and Karl Haushofer, sea power was a negligible factor.

Once again, and by default, therefore, the German navy was forced to turn to its U-boat arm in order to dispute Allied command of the sea. Once again, and even more ferociously, the battle of the Atlantic was fought. But, although they inflicted heavy losses upon Allied merchantmen and warships, the U-boats were simply not being produced in sufficient numbers by a service that had had little respect for commerce-raiding; and by the time Raeder had been replaced by Dönitz, and the newer and much more formidable types of submarines were available, it was too late to alter the outcome of the war.

To the extent that Tirpitz and Raeder favoured battlefleets and dismissed the importance of *guerre de course*, it might be said that both men had indeed 'read their Mahan'; but Mahan's observations about the difficulties a land power like Germany would always encounter in fighting a sea power like Great Britain were never properly faced by the German naval leadership. Finally, neither Tirpitz nor Raeder displayed any willingness to reconsider their own strategical and operational concepts in order to meet the actual conditions of both world wars, which, given the unpredictable nature of warfare, is a basic requirement for the success of any national policy.

* * *

Much the same might be said about the weaknesses that undermined Fascist Italy's bid to make the Mediterranean its *mare nostrum*. The geographical constraints upon Italian sea power were plain for anyone to see: its coastline was disproportionately long for its size, while economic and technological backwardness made it impossible to provide its navy with the maritime resources necessary to carry out its extensive tasks, which became the more extensive following the conquests of Libya and Abyssinia. If the First World War disguised this geographical problem, simply because French, British, and later, even Japanese and US warships were available in considerable numbers to deter any serious surface actions by the navies of the Central Powers,²⁹ Mussolini's challenge to the West in the 1930s once again exposed Italy's basic

²⁹ See the details in the excellent new study by P.G. Halpern, *The Naval War in the Mediterranean 1914-1918* (London, 1987).

weakness. It would be difficult enough to take on the French navy; the prospect of confronting the altogether more powerful Royal Navy, whose fleet bases at Gibraltar and Alexandria made Italy a 'prisoner in the Mediterranean', was even more daunting.

Perhaps these difficulties would have been overcome had the Italian navy received a substantial share of the national defence budget; but given the claims of the other two services, and the army's considerable role in politics, that was never likely. Perhaps, too, the navy could have advanced its strength by exploiting the newer weapon of air power; but it was specifically forbidden by Mussolini to possess aircraft-carriers and therefore relied for air support upon the *Regia Aeronautica*, which turned out to be disastrously ineffective in that regard. Given the restricted waters of the Mediterranean, the Italians might also have gained wartime supremacy by the successful use of the submarine. Alas for such fancies, while the navy actually possessed the second-largest submarine fleet in the world in 1939 (the Soviet Union had the largest), its craft were dreadfully deficient, more threatening to the life of their crews than to enemy warships or merchantmen.

While that might once again suggest that the root cause of Italy's maritime (and also military) weakness lay in its relative economic backwardness, Brian Sullivan argues strongly that another basic flaw was the psychological one. When brave and enterprising individuals were given their head, as in the penetration of Alexandria harbour by Italian frogmen in December 1941, success was possible. But the reason why such boldness occurred on only a few occasions was that the entire upper echelon of the naval officer corps was influenced by two considerations. The first was the desire to preserve the major warships of the fleet intact for the peace negotiations or, indeed, for the next war: hence Sullivan's title, 'A Fleet in Being'. Although Mahan himself had discussed the conditions under which that particular strategy might be necessary, the Italian navy's strong preference for it was about as far removed from Mahan's conception of the 'decisive battle' as one could get.

Second, the Italian fleet's disposition to remain in harbour was reinforced by its being in opposition, not to the French or Austrian or Turkish fleet, but to the Royal Navy, to which it had traditionally felt very inferior. As the British after 1940 had in Churchill a leader willing to accept heavy losses, and the Royal Navy itself (perhaps especially Admiral Cunningham, C-in-C, Mediterranean) believed in *offensive* naval warfare to wipe out the disappointments of the stalemated 1914-18 maritime conflict, Italian expectations of defeat were repeatedly fulfilled: off Calabria; at Taranto; at Cape Matapan; in the Gulf of Sirte.

The surface naval war in the Mediterranean thus consisted of a conflict between a navy that, for its own reasons, desperately wanted to avoid battle, and another that had been deliberately trained and encouraged to be as aggressive as possible. Which is not to say that the Italian navy would have been assured of victory had its attitude changed; its lack of radar, its gunnery weaknesses, the poor design of certain classes of its warships, the steady loss of command of the air to the Allies, all suggest that the most that could have happened would have been that individual units, like those of the German navy, would have died gallantly, inflicting perhaps heavy damage upon their superior enemy as they did so. At any event, the Mediterranean naval campaign of 1940-3 provided for much of the time a good and up-to-date example of an 'over-bearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it, or allows it only to appear as a fugitive'.

* * *

Despite the fitness of ending this introductory essay with that famous quotation, the overall impression conveyed by the cluster of national examples presented here is that sea power does indeed have influence, and have its limitations. In all cases, it turned out to be a combination of external circumstances – the geographical advantages or constraints upon the power in question, the balance between its land-based and sea-based requirements, the attitude of its government and public to the importance of maritime power – that dictated the outcome. To a large degree, that condition is simply stating a truism. For how could a nation exert successful sea power if it was badly disadvantaged in geographical terms, or its government was hostile or indifferent to navies? Obviously, then, circumstances counted.

But however trite this conclusion, it is important in permitting us to distinguish between the different levels of generalization that Mahan advanced in his exposition of the importance of sea power. Far too many of his followers, not to mention admiralities around the globe, swallowed his entire gospel as laid out in the 'Discussion of the Elements of Sea Power'. Yet the historical record – both from the classical age of sail, and from the two world wars of this century – suggests that while Mahan was essentially correct in stressing the six 'principal conditions affecting the sea power of nations', he was not so successful when he came to offer opinion about the *means* and *instruments* needed to achieve (or maintain) command of the sea: that is, whether it was always correct for a fleet to seek out a decisive battle; whether the *guerre de course* was always ineffective; whether the maritime pressures exerted by a commercial blockade would always grind the vitals of the

opposing state's economy. All of those issues, it is clear, would depend upon the larger circumstances; they never were, and are not now, of themselves part of those 'considerations and principles [which] belong to the unchangeable, or unchanging order of things'. On the contrary, they are likely to change in importance from war to war.

Little of this can offer much of a guide to those whose task it is to plan for the 'next' war at sea. Nor should it do so, in a serious historical investigation. What may be suggested here, however, is that any maritime policy that concentrates upon weapons-systems *per se*, or plans for a specific form of implementing national strategy, is highly unlikely to succeed unless it has also given much thought to those background 'conditions affecting the sea power of nations' to which Mahan drew our attention almost a century ago. To construct a decent-sized navy is all very well; but dreaming that it will be effective when the geostrategical or technical or political conditions are unfavourable to sea power is akin to tilting at windmills. That is to say, you are likely to be riding for a fall.

Yale University