

Spoils of War: The Fate of Enemy Fleets after the Two World Wars by Aidan Dodson & Serena Cant

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This most interesting new publication by Aidan Dodson and Serena Cant has been aimed at filling a long-noted gap in the histories of the fleets of the defeated nations of WW1 and WW2 after hostilities had ceased, describing the ultimate fates of the surrendered vessels, by blowtorch, destruction and accident. It serves as a long overdue corrective to much of the previous published material on this subject. Researchers who have worked in this field (including this reviewer) have long known that most of the previous texts (notably Gröner's two volumes on the German navies of WW1 and WW2) are strewn with factual errors and generalisations which do not stand up to scrutiny when new archival and archaeological evidence is uncovered.

It is to the credit of the authors that they have done much to improve what was, for the main part a very unreliable record. This has been possible because they have drawn together a number of sources including local press reports and the reported discoveries made by divers and maritime archaeologists. But perhaps the single most important new source to see its way into print in this book is the contents of the Admiralty sales ledger 1919-1939, held at the Naval Historical Branch. This contains the details on the disposal of the High Seas Fleet post WW1. This source was the basis of this reviewer's study of the scuttled Fleet at Scapa Flow, but it contains so much more than that, detailing the fates of virtually every surrendered U-boat and surface vessel, from which the authors have drawn deeply.

The book is divided into two parts covering WW1 and WW2. It begins with a standard retelling of the German mutiny and surrender of 1918, but really gets going with descriptions in separate chapters of how the enemy fleets (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey) were then allocated, distributed and disposed of by international treaty and by their new owners. While it is well known that Britain and the other major powers disposed of much of the High Seas Fleet, it is perhaps less well known how many of the smaller vessels ended up in the hands of minor players. Of particular interest is the sheer extent of the distribution to Brazil, Poland, Belgium, Portugal, Greece, Yugoslavia and others. Also well-covered is the history of the vessels which Germany was allowed to retain after WW1.

Part two describes the fates of the vessels of the Axis, including Japan. The Japanese navy and the Kriegsmarine are treated separately in their own chapters, while the navies of Italy, Romania, Bulgaria and Finland form another. As with part one, the "endgames" and division of the spoils are described in detail and show a high degree of research has been conducted to draw much new information from the sources uncovered. These chapters are again divided into, allocation, distribution and ultimate use and disposal. Again, the smaller nations who were recipients of the some of the vessels are given excellent coverage along with the better known cases.

Both parts end with detailed lists of the fates of every vessel. These are particularly impressive and go far beyond any previously available data and on their own, would be worth the price of the book. The end of each part is also treated to sets of three appendices each which seem to have been selected based on further research uncovered which could not conveniently be used with the main chapters. In that regard they feel a little disjointed, but nevertheless contain myriad information of

interest, including, for example an appendix which goes as far as to examine the reuse of U-boat engines in the UK after WW1. The reader might be amused to learn of the role played by U-boat engines in production of beer in the post-war years.

The sheer ambitiousness of the scope of this book is admirable. However it is therefore unsurprising that some mistakes have crept in. For example, the authors give a lengthy explanation as to why they could not find a recorded fate for the early U-boat *U3*. This includes an unconvincing interpretation of some documents they did uncover. Ultimately they claim “the details of her loss cannot be identified from the admittedly scant surviving records”. This in fact is not the case at all.

It is also important to note, as the authors concede, that they could only go so far with their research. In books of this type, the research is always confined to the archive and the desktop, leaving obvious gaps. This is not a problem when dealing with the vast majority of vessels which have known, unquestionably confirmed fates. But what about those lost at sea with dubious archival evidence, such as *UB118*? In the absence of any archaeological fieldwork of their own, the authors can only highlight “key outstanding queries in the hope that this may contribute to their final resolution”. In these cases they have not been helped by the seemingly random manner in which the heritage aspect of Britain’s chartered shipwrecks continues to be compiled. In fact *UB118* is a well-known wreck site, surveyed on video by this reviewer 18 years ago, but its confused entry in the Historic England Archive serves to illustrate the point. Nevertheless for the purposes of this book these are minor issues, but they explain why, once outside of archival sources, it could never be entirely definitive.

As with so many of the recent crop of Seaforth publications, this one is beautifully presented. It is also well illustrated with a very good selection of photographs covering the surrendered submarines and warships, many from Dodson’s personal collection. Many are new to this reviewer and most are surely being published for the first time. The maps are also very useful in describing how the ships were both distributed and sunk, where known. Overall this is an important, landmark book in the study of the post war distribution and disposal of enemy naval vessels. It is currently without doubt the most comprehensive text in its field and is recommended to members without qualification as an important reference source.

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