



Nicholas Black *The British Naval Staff in the First World War*, The Boydell Press - £60

One of the pleasures of being a historian seems to be undermining the myths that have grown up over the years. The First World War suffers from more myths than almost any period, and here is another book that doesn't just undermine the myths, but comprehensively demolishes them. I must declare an interest: first, Nick Black is a fellow schoolmaster, and secondly a colleague on the Council of the Navy Records Society. However, he is far more intelligent than me (not difficult) and this book is effectively his PhD thesis.

He takes as the basis of his thesis that previous historians have been almost unanimous in stating that the naval staff was inadequate during the war, citing Marder, Richmond, Dewar, Kenworthy and many others. He successfully demolishes their myths one by one. Firstly, he shows that although there were some bad staff officers, naturally, the naval staff between 1914 and December 1916 was not made up of dug-outs and those who could not go to sea. Rather than there being a revolution with the arrival of Jellicoe in December 1916, and at other key moments, there was in fact an evolution. Secondly, he demonstrates that the portrayal of a number of senior staff officers as "Monsters", such as Captain Jackson and Admirals Oliver and Duff, is quite unfair. These portrayals were usually written by those who wanted themselves to be seen as "Heroes", namely the Young Turks such as Richmond, Dewar and above all Kenworthy. Then he examines the way the Naval Staff influenced naval operations and assesses the quality of the staff advice in a number of specific areas: the handling of the Grand Fleet, the blockade of Germany, the defence of British trade, operations in the Baltic, 1914-15, the inception of the Dardanelles operation, and the search for the offensive in 1918. His conclusion is that in most areas of naval strategy the Naval Staff gave good advice. *"Their knowledge of both the wider picture of the war and the limitations that both technology and competing demands placed on the viability of alternative strategies meant that for the most part what they offered was common sense and not wishful thinking."*

Of particular interest to BCMH members will be his chapter on the inception of the Gallipoli operations. Churchill does not come well out of his examination of the documents. Whether he actually lied to the Dardanelles Commission or whether he was merely being mealy mouthed, there can be no doubt that the Naval Staff advised the First Lord not to proceed with the operation principally on the grounds that if they got as far as Constantinople there was no guarantee that the city would fall to them, and anyway if it did surrender there was no ability to hold it. Nor did they see any realistic prospect of a domino effect taking place in the Balkans, as Churchill believed would happen. Not only did Churchill ignore the advice of his professional advisers, but he also set up different advisory bodies and lines of communication (as he was to do in the Norway campaign in 1940). Indeed he tried, as far as one can make it out, to keep everybody else off balance so that only he actually knew what he really wanted. His belief that the Turks would surrender once Constantinople fell was contradicted by the historical evidence of the Boers, who lasted two years after the fall of Pretoria in 1900, and the Austrians in 1805, whose capital Vienna fell before they were defeated at Austerlitz. As the author says *"It is a cliché to say that people learn from history. It is rarely true. More commonly the wrong lessons are drawn."*

Black's conclusion that although the Naval Staff did make some mistakes, it more generally got things right, is hard to dispute. In particular he emphasizes that the Admiralty was at the



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centre of an information web, and that the Staff directed this intelligence to the right people with advice on what to do with it. His best example of this is the blockade of Germany. Traditional views of this state that the blockade was instituted in August 1914 and slowly but surely strangled Germany, so that by 1918 there was revolution and starvation in Germany. In fact, the Staff wanted a much tighter blockade from August 1914 and it was the Liberal government, who were reluctant to enforce it so harshly, afraid to upset Britain's trading partners. Thus the blockade was not really effective until 1917 when the USA entered the war, and the Naval Staff's advice had not been taken. In the same way that the history of the Battle of Jutland became personalized by the feud between Jellicoe and Beatty, with their various supporters writing volumes denigrating the other side, so the writing of the history of the Naval Staff has equally been personalized, with the first crucial draft of that history being written by embittered naval officers with their own agenda. Historians who followed, such as Marder "*believed too much of what he read in ... Richmond's diary, or gleaned from his tea-time visits to the homes of naval widows in the 1950s and 1960s.*"

Many veterans of the BCMH have played a valiant role in the rehabilitation of the British generals of the First World War, particularly of Douglas Haig. In this volume Nicholas Black does the same for the Naval Staff, unjustly denigrated and usually derided by historians. That he succeeds is excellent news, both for the seeker after truth in general terms, and also for all those who are interested in naval history in particular.

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