H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark D. Karau. *"Wielding the Dagger": The MarineKorps Flandern and the German War Effort, 1914-1918.* London and Westport: Praeger, 2003. x + 268 pp. $67.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-32475-8.

Reviewed by John Lavalle (Department of Social Sciences, Western New Mexico University)

Published on H-German (December, 2004)

Germany's Blunt Dagger

In *"Wielding the Dagger": The MarineKorps Flandern and the German War Effort, 1914-1918*, Mark D. Karau chronicles the German military exploitation of the Belgian coast in World War I. The Belgian coast was vital to German naval strategy. Possession of the Belgian ports, especially Ostend, Zeebrugge, and Brugges, extended the German naval threat out of the Helgoland Bight and threatened the eastern end of the English Channel. In order to protect the ports, German High Command, at the urging of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, head of the German Naval Office, created MarineDivision Flandern, commanded by Admiral Ludwig von Schroeder, in 1914. Shortly thereafter, the force was expanded to MarineKorps Flandern. One mission of the MarineKorps was to protect the coast from invasion and air attack. As such, it ran afoul of the army's mission and one of von Schroeder's continuing fights was against the army high command over control of guns and manpower.

The other mission of the MarineKorps was the prosecution of the naval *Kleinkrieg* against Britain. Possession of the Belgian ports placed the German navy within seventy nautical miles of the Thames estuary, creating a more serious threat to the British Grand Fleet than that represented by the German High Seas Fleet, which could not expect to sortie without detection. Von Tirpitz, and von Schroeder, according to Karau, were among the very few men within the German navy who recognized the value of the Belgian ports, thus the German navy was slow to exploit its newfound position of strength. The creation of the Flanders Submarine, Torpedo-boat, and Destroyer Flotillas in 1915, theoretically, allowed the German navy to press the advantage of the Belgian ports. The British response to the presence of the German flotillas was to strengthen the Dover Patrol to counter the new threat, weakening the British Grand Fleet in the process. In fact, the Flanders flotillas, with the exception of the submarines, were rarely strong enough to operate independently because MarineKorps Flandern had to compete with the Baltic Fleet and the High Seas Fleet for ships. On the two occasions the flotillas had sufficient surface ships (borrowed from the High Seas Fleet) to act aggressively they carried out successful raids against the British, and tied down a large number of British warships. The Germans, however, never followed up the success of the raids with continued offensive action. The differ-

ent response from the opposing navies supports Karau's statement that the Germans failed to understand how to use their navy.

Karau provides a highly detailed account of the creation, history, and disbanding of MarineKorps Flandern. The strength of this work is the discussion of the constant pleas on the part of von Schroeder for more ships, men, and authority. With the exception of Tirpitz, these pleas fell on deaf ears. The various commanders of the High Seas Fleet were resistant to von Schroeder's pleas, preferring that the ships, mostly destroyers, that Schroeder requested remain with the largely inactive main fleet rather than be put into action with the Flanders Destroyer Flotilla. This discussion highlights the inter- and intraservice rivalries within the German military. Not only did von Schroeder have to fight the army for control of the ground forces and heavy artillery attached to MarineKorps Flandern, but he also had to fight his own superiors in the navy to secure enough ships to carry out his mission.

To round out the story, Karau provides a discussion of German plans for Belgium, both during and after the war, and the diplomatic problem posed by a neutral Holland. The story of the German navy's utilization of the Belgian coast is not one which has been heavily mined in recent years in English or German. Thus the book makes a distinct contribution to the scholarship of the First World War.

Having said that, I should note that the work, at times, becomes bogged down in details. The discussions of the squabbling between von Schroeder, the army, and commanders of the High Seas Fleet drag at times. The division of the text into small periods of time, during which MarineKorps Flandern was engaged in little more than routine duties provide high levels of detail, but detract from the flow of the text. This problem is exacerbated by the almost total lack of a connection with the land campaigns on the Western Front, other than those that directly affected the MarineKorps, which would help those of us more versed in land operations understand how MarineKorps Flandern fit into the overall German war effort.

Karau does a fine job of describing the major German surface actions, such as the two successful destroyer raids, and the British raid on Zeebrugge in 1918. This narrative flair does not, however, extend to the discussion of submarine operations. These operations, arguably, were the most significant contribution of MarineKorps Flandern to the German war effort, yet they receive far less attention than do the surface operations. Karau asserts that the submarines based in Belgium accounted for 25 percent of the tonnage sunk by German submarines and he provides monthly totals of shipping sunk by the submarines after the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917, but that is as far as he takes it. Karau is correct in reasserting the idea that the German navy squandered a multitude of chances because of its unwillingness to act aggressively and put ships at risk. On the other hand, his implication that the German high command believed Germany was going to win or lose the war at sea is, I believe, off the mark.

In the final analysis, *"Wielding the Dagger"* contributes to the field of German naval history and the First World War, but is recommended for a specialist audience.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: John Lavalle. Review of Karau, Mark D., *"Wielding the Dagger": The MarineKorps Flandern and the German War Effort, 1914-1918.* H-German, H-Net Reviews. December, 2004.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10053

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.