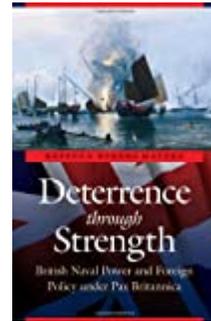




**Rebecca Berens Matzke.** *Deterrence through Strength: British Naval Power and Foreign Policy under Pax Britannica.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. x + 306 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3514-4.



**Reviewed by** Paul M. Ramsey (University of Calgary)

**Published on** H-War (February, 2014)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

## The Importance of Naval Power in History

Historians have overlooked or failed to understand the importance of naval power in history. The works of the famous Niall Ferguson and the celebrated Paul Kennedy are good examples. In *The Pity of War: Explaining World War I* (1999) the role of naval power in British policy, diplomacy, and grand strategy is marginalized, leading Ferguson to misunderstand Britain's war aims and draw inaccurate conclusions. An analysis of British power, Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (1976) incorrectly placed the decline of British naval power in the late nineteenth century. The book's failures were threefold: overestimating the relative importance of the continental military/industrial complex; misunderstanding how naval power works; and misjudging the supremacy of the Royal Navy in British grand strategy. This "continentalist" view of history is problematic as naval power has played a central role in contemporary international and diplomatic history, a narrative the public no longer understands.

The publication of the naval thinker Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (1889)

reminded a generation of the role naval power had played in shaping the contemporary world. Mahan along with other naval and military writers, including Stephen B. Luce, Julian S. Corbett, H. Spenser Wilkinson, and John Knox Laughton, popularized naval history and laid the foundations of the modern discipline.[1] Their work ensured that the public understood well into the twentieth century what naval power made possible. The Battle of the Atlantic, the Pacific War, and the use of the ballistic missile submarines for strategic nuclear deterrence should have reconfirmed this impression. However, the experience of naval power at work did not survive the challenge on the public mind during the Cold War of the German frontier and the Soviet threat of a land invasion. The study of naval history waned and the corollary was a wider failure to understand the historical importance of navies and sea power.

In the 1980s, the trailblazing work of Andrew Lambert in *Battleships in Transition: The Creation of the Steam Battlefleet, 1815-1860* (1984) and *The Crimean War: British Grand Strategy Against Russia, 1853-1856* (1990)

looked to redress this failure (p. vii). Lambert argued that Britain's strategic foreign policy in the nineteenth century was based on a naval/maritime strategy; naval, not land, power was central to British policy, keeping down France and Russia and maintaining the balance of power in Europe. The end of the Cold War changed national defense policy priorities, reemphasizing maritime strategy and renewing interest in naval affairs. Lambert's timely contribution revived several debates in naval history and along with John F. Beeler's *British Naval Policy in the Gladstone-Disraeli Era, 1866-1880* (1997) and Nicholas A. Lambert's *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (1999) strengthened the discipline. Andrew Lambert's *The Challenge: Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812* (2012) and Nicholas Lambert's *Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War* (2012) are the latest works to excellently illustrate what historians generally disregard: British policy was often implemented by naval power and Britain influenced other nations with its navy, greatly affecting global events into the twentieth century (p. viii). Rebecca Berens Matzke's skilled analysis of British power and policy from 1838 to 1846 deserves to be read together with these important works.

*Deterrence through Strength* is an excellent reassessment of the validity of the concept of the Pax Britannica and the maintenance of the global balance of power in the nineteenth century. Since the 1960s historians have argued that the general peace from 1815 to 1914 depended not on British naval power and its limited ability to influence continental affairs, but on the politics and diplomacy of the European system; European powers were responsible for the European peace. Contrary to those historians and others who cite "negative reasons for Britain's relative power and the period of general peace,"[2] Matzke argues that Britain's "real power: naval strength backed by economic and financial strength ... was disproportionately responsible for maintaining the system because it was the one great power that possessed the ability to influence Europe ... but also lacked the continental ambitions that would have made it dangerous and destabilizing" (pp. 5-6). Deterrence was central to British strategic foreign policy in the nineteenth century and British naval power posed a visible, credible, and genuine threat that shaped the attitudes of European powers (p. 9). "British capabilities were greater than are usually assumed" because the Royal Navy was an effective deterrent force and the "scarcity of naval actions would be a measure of its success" (p. 8). British foreign policy under Pax Britannica,

Matzke argues, was based on deterrence through naval strength. This strategy secured British interests, including the maintenance of the balance of power and a general peace in Europe.

Foreign policy in the early Victorian period was shaped by the nature of British policymaking and the instrument of British power, the Royal Navy. Cleverly combining primary sources and personal papers to create a picture of policymaking, Matzke demonstrates how British "government decision making was still quite personalized and prebureaucratic," meaning "personality and concerns of one cabinet member might steer national policy" (p. 11). It was possible for Lord Palmerston and Lord Aberdeen during their tenures as foreign secretary to make British foreign policy with only minimal constraints, mainly, "ministers had to demonstrate that they were defending British interests" to win over party colleagues and notable members of society (p. 21). "Disputes over foreign policy were minimal" because British interests were well understood and Palmerston and Aberdeen had similar strategic perspectives (p. 16). British priorities were "stability and peace" to "preserve national wealth," providing security for Britain's global and European trade (p. 26). This defensive policy, Matzke argues, "embraced a defensive strategy that was operationally offensive: deterrence through strength" (p. 30). Deterrence, defined by military intellectual Thomas Schelling in *The Strategy of Conflict* (1963) as "the skillful nonuse of military forces," is the strategy of using threats to coerce the enemy to do your will and not use military action (quoted, p. 31). For Britain this meant using the Royal Navy "to send a signal of British power" that was potent, persuasive, and relatively cheap (p. 30). The Royal Navy enabled Britain to "project the nation's power," giving "Britain special strength" with other European powers struggling to compete (p. 37). New steam and shell technology enhanced the Royal Navy's power projection capability, allowing Britain to command the sea, protecting trade and the British Isles, but also importantly, to control access to the oceans in wartime by blockading enemy ships and trade in port, the Royal Navy's traditional strategy. Matzke argues that the limited number of naval actions during this period was due to the potency of British naval power—"a dynamic instrument for upholding British interests, deterring rivals, and maintaining peace,"—and "a successful policy of deterrence" (pp. 63; 35).

Demonstrating "deterrence through strength," three examples of the Royal Navy's ability to deter the enemy and shape diplomacy are examined, in North America,

China, and the Mediterranean. The aggressive expansionism of the United States strained Anglo-American relations in the 1830s and 1840s, increasing the chances of war. Peace was secured, Matzke argues, because "Britain posed a credible threat to the United States," who was "fully aware of Britain's strategic advantages," the offensive capability of the Royal Navy to blockade U.S. maritime cities, destroying trade and threatening the coast (pp. 65; 71). The deterrent effect of the Royal Navy had a significant influence on diplomacy because it was clear that challenging British naval power was financial suicide. Signaling and preparing this threat was enough to secure British interests in North America, peace, trade, profit, and the rights of British colonists. Deterrence worked because the United States knew the price of irrationality, having experienced the ruinous bankrupting power of the Royal Navy in the War of 1812.

China had no experience of British naval capabilities and was less sure about British power. During the first Opium War (1839-42) Britain initially failed to demonstrate that it posed a credible threat and had the political will to use force for deterrence to secure a rational diplomatic response from China. Matzke shows how Britain used force for coercion and "decided to act offensively," using steamers for a "strategy that proved conclusive: proceeding upriver to the Grand Canal in order to stop communications and trade in the populous region that supplied Peking," a plan that confronted "the emperor with evidence of British capabilities and commitment that could not be ignored" (pp. 105; 125; 140). The Royal Navy paralyzed China's internal trade and communications, forcing the Chinese to sign the Treaty of Nanking on August 29, 1842, and cede Hong Kong to Britain. A visible signal that naval power trumped land power, it "impressed even great powers" and observed British strength had a broad deterrent effect beyond China (p. 151).

In Europe, the Mediterranean was vital for trade and the independence of the Ottoman Empire from French and Russian power was fundamental to British foreign policy in the nineteenth century. Demonstrated during the Syrian Crisis (1839-41), the Royal Navy achieved this by threatening European "trade, overseas interests, and even their own coasts" and using Britain's naval supremacy, destroying the Egyptian threat to Ottoman control in the Levant and deterring French intervention (p. 156). France feared British naval power and grasped the truth of Palmerston's claim that it "could no more think of opposing us in the Mediterranean than of conquering the moon" (p. 206). As Matzke clearly

shows, British naval power was no illusion for Russia and France. Deterrence through strength "worked because decision makers in London relied not upon the mere show of force but upon real British naval capabilities" (p. 215). The presence of British naval power in the important strategic and publicly visible theater of the Mediterranean underpinned its diplomatic strength and was "effective as an influence for peace" (p. 205). British strategy aimed to deter European and rival nations with a strong Royal Navy; this deterrence through strength secured British dominance and the Pax Britannica.

*Deterrence through Strength* has no weak sections and very few weaknesses. Matzke's decision to interrupt the historical narrative with political science theories from Bruce Bueno de Mesquita's *Principles of International Relations: People's Power, Preferences, and Perceptions* (2000), arguing that 1838 to 1846 "seems to fit a strategic perspective of international relations," while accurate is regrettable, spoiling the clarity of her otherwise stylistically strong form (p. 11); a citation note would have been preferable in the other places in the text where Matzke includes similar interjections (pp. 15; 25-26; 35). Alternatively, the relevance and use of Thomas Schelling's theories of deterrence is obvious to the reader and makes a clear contribution to Matzke's strong argument (p. 31). Added to the standard set of unpublished official records, the variety and use of private papers is impressive. The precision and simplicity of Matzke's work in organization, method, and argument is also laudable. *Deterrence through Strength* has a great deal to recommend.

Matzke successfully challenges an established narrative of British power in the nineteenth century, building on the "new naval history" of the 1980s and 1990s, making an important contribution to our understanding of naval power in the context of British, European, and world history. Naval power is a peculiar kind of power because it is not always visible and the nature of deterrence means that the effects are not always clear. *Deterrence through Strength* makes a strong case for reassessing the perceived decline of Britain as a world power from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to a general confusion about the role of naval power in foreign policy and the comparisons made of the last decade with the small wars of the nineteenth century forget what Matzke's argument makes clear: British deterrence through naval power was responsible for the wider peace and stability. *Deterrence through Strength* will engage specialist and armchair readers, academics and students, from start to finish, leaving few with any doubts about

the historical importance of naval power and the reality of the "Britishness" of Pax Britannica.

#### Notes

[1]. Andrew Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Profession* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998).

[2]. Works cited by Matzke giving "negative reasons for British power" include Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Allen Lane, 1976); C. J. Bartlett, ed., *Britain Pre-eminent: Studies of British World Influence in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 1969); and Gerald S. Graham, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy: Studies in British Maritime Ascendancy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

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

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Paul M. Ramsey. Review of Matzke, Rebecca Berens, *Deterrence through Strength: British Naval Power and Foreign Policy under Pax Britannica*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35567>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.