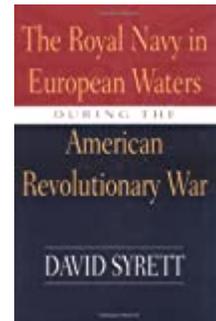


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David Syrett. *The Royal Navy in European Waters during the American Revolution.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998. xi + 213 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-238-7.



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Over the past decade or so naval historians of the eighteenth-century Royal Navy have published an impressive body of work addressing, among other things, its strategic and operational roles in the War for American Independence. One of the latest is David Syrett's *Royal Navy in European Waters during the American Revolution*. This account of Britain's European naval operations is a compelling chronicle of poor leadership, strategic short-sightedness, and infighting at the highest political and military levels.

Syrett, a professor of history at Queens College, CUNY, argues that Lord North's ministry was responsible for the Royal Navy's "inability . . . to decisively defeat American, French, Spanish, and Dutch naval power in European waters (ix)." North, self-admittedly a poor war leader, gave little positive direction to cabinet members responsible for handling military and naval operations. Instead, he busied himself with parliamentary matters and allowed Lord George Germain, secretary of state for the American colonies and responsible for directing military affairs, and John Montagu, Earl of Sandwich, first lord of the Admiralty, to conduct their business seemingly free of superior authority and direction. This lack of strategic oversight and clear direction accounted for Britain's often muddled and self-defeating prosecution of the war. Throughout, in both its American and international phases, the ministry opted for a strategy of cover-

ing all British possessions with as few ships as possible.

The Royal Navy's thinly stretched forces prevented it from adequately confining American blockade-runners, privateers, and the nascent Continental Navy to port or hunting them down at sea. When the war turned into a European affair against France, Spain, and the Netherlands, the navy's ability to intervene decisively was decidedly limited. As Syrett points out, there would be no repeat of "Lagos or Quiberon Bay" in the American War; British policy had effectively circumscribed the power and effectiveness of the Royal Navy (x). Indeed, it would not be until the "French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, [that] the Royal Navy smashed French and Spanish naval power and . . . confined" them to port (x).

The Royal Navy in European Waters fills an important historiographic place in eighteenth-century naval history. It is clearly written, well argued, and soundly researched. These factors, combined with Syrett's ease at making the intricacies of ministerial and maritime maneuverings clearly and easily understood will make this work accessible to the educated public and appreciated by specialists in the field.

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