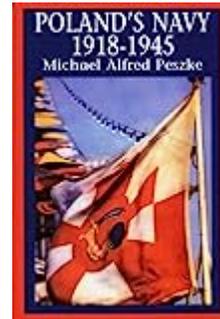


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Michael A. Peszke. *Poland's Navy, 1918-1945.* New York: Hippocrene Books, 1999. ix + 215 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7818-0672-5.

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A common technique in writing a book review is to compare the item under consideration with similar titles. In this case, no comparison is possible because *Poland's Navy 1918-1945* is the first English-language study on the topic.

Michael Peszke, whose father served in Poland's tiny naval aviation service between the wars, has written widely on all aspects of the Polish military between 1918 and 1945 (e.g. Peszke 1981, 1994, 1995). While the Polish Navy (PN) was an active and capable participant in World War II, it has been overshadowed in the literature by its much larger sister services. Book-length accounts in English treat the Polish Army (Anders 1981, Sosabowski 1982) and Polish Air Force (Polish Air Force Association 1949, Cynk 1998). Prior to the publication of *Poland's Navy, 1918-1945*, the available literature in English on the Polish Navy during World War II was limited to a handful of short articles in specialist naval history and naval architecture magazines and journals. Historians could also find brief accounts of Polish naval operations in the official British study of the Royal Navy during World War II (Roskill 1954-60). *Poland's Navy, 1918-1945* fills a gap in the literature of the greatest war in history.

After the partitioning of Poland in the late 1700s, Poland suddenly reemerged as a sovereign state in 1918. While Poland possessed a small coastline and an even

smaller defense budget, a naval service was established not long after Poland achieved independence. Limited resources, uncertainty over naval strategy, and subservience to the army left Poland's navy a small but professional force.

While Poland was rapidly conquered by invading German and Soviet armies in 1939, elements of the Polish military escaped to France and Great Britain to continue the fight. The PN was successfully reestablished in Britain due to the foresight of the Polish high command that sent three of the five major surface ships and both sail training ships out of the Baltic before hostilities began. These five ships were joined by two submarines, (including the famous *Orzel*) that had escaped from the Baltic when further resistance in home waters became futile.

Peszke structures his account of the PN in rough chronological order by theater of action. Separate chapters covering operations in the Baltic, North Sea, Atlantic, and Mediterranean are included, and although the book is not a comprehensive operational history of the PN, the reader learns of the major actions in which Polish ships participated. In addition to the operational side, Peszke explains how the PN was organized, equipped, and led. The last few chapters combine operational accounts of 1944-1945 with the major diplomatic decisions reached

by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union that determined Poland's post-war fate. The eleven chapters are supplemented by seven appendices, including the text of Anglo-Polish military agreements, a list of the major Polish warships, explanations of the Polish naval air service, the Polish merchant marine, and the Polish women's naval auxiliary service, plus a table of Polish naval ranks with British equivalents.

As the author tells the story of the PN, he reminds the reader of general developments during the war and links the situation of the PN to its sister services and the Royal Navy. The reader comes away with a clear understanding of the PN's accomplishments and frustrations. Along with pointing out the great achievements of the PN, the author also notes some of its failings, such as neglecting to obtain motor torpedo boats before the war, purchasing submarines that were too large for the shallow Baltic, and wasting precious manpower manning an obsolete light cruiser.

One of the greatest strengths of the book, besides its linkage with the wider story of the war, is the number and quality of sources used. Peszke made use of documents (Admiralty, Foreign Office) held by the Public Record Office outside London, and the Polish Institute, also in London. These primary sources are supplemented

by an extensive list of published works, some of which are memoirs of PN officers. While each chapter has endnotes, the author also provides both a bibliography of basic sources in English and a note explaining the material available in both English and Polish on various subtopics of Polish naval history.

The weaknesses of this book are few and relatively minor. Naval ranks are given in Polish, obliging the reader to frequently refer to the appendix. In describing the limited Polish coastline and key bases in the Baltic, and again later in the chapter on operations in the Mediterranean Sea, Peszke notes locations, but offers no map for reference. In fact, there is not a single map in the entire book. Finally, frequent typographical errors catch the reader's eye.

Poland's Navy 1918-1945 is a unique book that fills a distinct gap in the literature of World War II. The book explains the operational and institutional history of the PN and connects the PN with the wider naval and diplomatic forces that shaped it. Peszke's book also can serve as an introduction to Polish military and diplomatic history between the wars, given the work's lengthy bibliography and bibliographic notes. I recommend this book to students of Polish military history and World War II naval history.

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