

Paul G. Halpern. *The Battle of the Otranto Straights: Controlling the Gateway to the Adriatic in WWI.* Indiana University Press, 2004.

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Although Professor Halpern admits that this story is one that is rarely referred to as one of the great naval battles in history, he humbly points out that it was, indeed, the largest encounter between warships in the Adriatic and the Mediterranean during the First World War. It was also one of the first encounters at sea where aircraft played a definitive role at sea; air power was not decisive as it later becomes in the Second World War, but it was, as Halpern noted, “an indication of things to come.” The battle also elucidates for students that Austria and Hungary were once united as a great power and, despite being seemingly landlocked, not only did they have access to the sea but also control of most of the eastern shoreline of the Adriatic. Moreover, the traditional maritime powers of Britain, France, and Italy had difficulty contending with the Austro-Hungarian *k.u.k. Kriegsmarine* as it was difficult for them to bring any power to bear within that area; they could not enter the Adriatic for fear of mines and Austro-Hungarian submarines. The Austro-Hungarians had a true battle fleet that consisted not just of smaller ships and subs, but Dreadnoughts as well. And even after Italy entered the war on the side of the Entente, the Italian battle fleet was not in the Adriatic at all, but was located at Taranto, in the arch of the Italian boot.

Halpern goes into great detail of the events leading to the battle in the Adriatic and those fascinated with naval and Great War history will truly find it a compelling read. The book contains excellent sourcing, as Halpern has cited extensive correspondence from participants of the war, and used the War or National Archives in Italy, Austria, and London to tell his story with finesse. Halpern points out, for example, the curiosity of the Triple Alliance naval convention of 1913, where it was decided that Italy and Austria-Hungary would, with the blessing of Germany, unite their fleets in time of war, even though they were essentially built to counter one another. The convention remained void, of course, as Italy stayed neutral at the outbreak anyway. While many of these examples will hold the readers attention, much of the minutia that the author goes into on things such shipping losses, failed ambush attempts, and counter sweeps becomes quite bland. Citing the meticulous planning of the raid in an entire chapter may also seem cumbrous, but it does show the intricacies of warfare that had to be undertaken, even in a relatively obscure and previously neglected naval theatre.

Halpern also admits that operations around the Straights were a stalemate for most of the war. It is clear that the Austro-Hungarian navy was masked off from major operations in the Mediterranean and could only enter it at the risk of losing the few major vessels that they had; while a threat at the opening of the Straight, rarely did they venture out of the them where the Entente forces had clear naval superiority. But he also points out the clear strategic value for the German-Austria-Hungarian side of having access through the Mediterranean, especially after the first German U-boats – UB7 and UB8 – were sent to operate from Austrian bases in the Adriatic. Halpern thoughtfully explains how the Austro-Hungarians and Germans were extremely successful at sinking

Allied shipping, as the British, French and Italian navies lacked any unified command and the convoy system was not yet fully used. The weather was also better in the Mediterranean than the Atlantic or the North sea, allowing them to operate more often.

The Allies, of course, realized that many of these subs traveled into the Mediterranean through the straits of Otranto, and it was, therefore, a targeted chokepoint for most of the war and why Halpern's volume is worth the read. The focus of the book is the attempt of the Austro-Hungarians to attack the Allied drifter boats armed with nets and mines that disrupted submarine activity. During the raid, the *Kriegsmarine* circumvented the Otranto Barrage, designed by the Allies to prevent access by enemy submarines to the Mediterranean via the Adriatic, and attacked the Allied drifter boats, sinking fourteen of them. During this 'Mediterranean Jutland' the Austro-Hungarians were then cut off from their base in the Adriatic and Halpern somewhat lionizes the process by which they managed to escape and return to base safely. It is definitely a story of the underdog and Halpern's energetic and articulate writing engross the reader as he explains how the "weaker fleet was able to escape while inflicting more damage than it suffered itself." Some readers are probably even a little sad when they discover that, with the end of the war and the end of the Habsburg Empire the *k.u.k. Kriegsmarine* was divided among the Allies. The Austro-Hungarian navy was then nothing more than a "historical curiosity". While this book may seem far too specialized to many, it is books like these, on seemingly obscure parts of the war, that help make this tangled global story complete.