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American Sea Power in the Old World: the United States Navy in European and Near Eastern Waters, 1865-1917

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The question of maritime activities in the Mediterranean Sea has always been a crucial yet minor topic in modern naval history. Because of the increasing maritime activity through the trade routes from Europe to its colonies and the progressive redistribution of power outside the old continent, historians have generally focused on the world's oceans. Experienced historian William N. Still Jr. goes against this tendency with a volume on the United States Navy's history in the Mediterranean, which details the evolution of the European squadron in the Basin.

Starting from American naval activity in the post-Civil War era, Still details the development of the European squadron amidst the political ferment that crossed Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After the frantic years of the American Civil War, when the U.S. Navy was in charge of holding the Confederacy off from major trade lines with Europe, the existence of the European Squadron was under scrutiny by American Congressional leaders. Despite the remarkable presence of American citizens along the Mediterranean shores, American naval presence in the region seemed superfluous due

to relatively minor incidents. Yet, the political situation in Europe was only apparently at peace. In the years leading up to the First World War, every place from the Spanish coast to the Near East waters was a theatre of crucial political turmoil that progressively shaped the region's history and the destiny of regional empires. The alternation between quiet and storm made Mediterranean naval affairs hard to navigate for American political leaders who wished to cut back on naval costs but often realised that the European squadron was the best protection for American interests and citizens. Through the narration of the swinging attitude that American leaders held toward the Mediterranean, Still also manages to provide an interesting account of American relations with powers in the Basin at the time. Although Still's narration covers all significant actors, his focus consistently circles back to the Ottoman Empire, gradually descending to the status of 'the great sick man of Europe' during the last decades of the nineteenth century. In this respect, Still interestingly points out how American attitudes and interests towards their naval presence in Eastern waters were not only due to trade and maritime interests but also greatly influenced by domestic political dynamics and their grasp on American diplomacy (the presence of religious missionaries in the Ottoman Empire is a clear example, albeit not the only one (Chapter Two and Four). This well-rounded survey of American relationships in the Basin is evident in the structure of the volume, which perfectly describes the ascendant parable of the European squadron. The chapters are indeed chronologically ordered and successfully balance the recollection of the region's political environment with the history of the crucial changes that interested the European squadron – and, by default, the U.S. Navy – at the turn of the twentieth century.

The centre of the volume (Chapters Five and Six) marks the dramatic shift in American naval policies in the last decade of the nineteenth century. A revived naval conscience allowed for the political attitude toward the thorny question of the European squadron to give rise to a new season for the U.S. Navy, whose relevance in the American strategic perspective grew exponentially. The rest of the volume, which finishes in the crucial year 1917, chronicles the constant crescendo of American maritime activity in the Mediterranean, especially in Ottoman waters. This final yet revealing analysis sheds light on the American naval approach in Eastern Mediterranean waters during the initial years of neutrality in the First World War and opens a window into the role of the U.S. Navy in Eastern European waters during the conflict, a less talked about role than the more notorious cooperation with the Royal Navy in the Atlantic blockade of the German Empire. Unfortunately, the time frame of the volume does not allow Still to go further into this specific topic. There is a clear choice of reporting American naval activity between wars, allowing Still to delve into the history

of the U.S. Navy from an intertwined perspective and underline the double role of naval forces as both political and military means. Yet, because of the general disproportion of resources available between the Atlantic and Mediterranean theatres, it would have been great to have an additional chapter which could expand on American naval activity between 1917 and 1923, the birth year of the Turkish Republic. This final missing chapter, however, does not hinder the overall reading experience of a volume that contains an excellent example of historical prose and provides a sound argument for reorienting the compass of naval history beyond the world's oceans.

The most noteworthy feature of *American Sea Power in the Old World* is the focus on the interactions between political and military leaders at various levels. Throughout his narration, Still pays excellent attention to the personalities that characterised American diplomatic and maritime activity during this era. Each phase of the squadron can be easily identified by the description of its commanders or the diplomatic and political leaders with whom they interacted. This attention to the human side of history provides Still's volume with a crucial analytical edge, combining detailed and in-depth historical research with captivating storytelling. The book is well-researched and perfectly demonstrates the author's expertise, never sacrificing the reader's experience. Still's style is seamless and well-balanced throughout the pages, even when he dedicates space to more technical aspects of his research, like the logistics of the squadron (Chapter Three).

The impeccable approach to historical narration makes *American Sea Power in the Old World* a must-read for all naval history buffs and one of the best examples of historical research in the field. Part of Still's talent resides in providing the reader with an all-encompassing reading experience. Although it is a descriptive volume, *American Sea Power in the Old World* still offers some food for thought to scholars and history enthusiasts who can appreciate the connections with the present situation in the Mediterranean Basin. Through a thorough overview of the political environment in the region and the slow but steady build-up to the First World War and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, William N. Still Jr. offers solid evidence of the importance of the Mediterranean in American naval strategy and the pivotal role of civil-naval relations in the history of the U.S. Navy's European Squadron. As Still demonstrates, these elements created a crucial interplay that favoured the survival and later revival of the European squadron, which became essential in wartime. In this spirit, *American Sea Power in the Old World* offers a precious lesson for the United States as it rediscovers its position as the preeminent naval power in the world: never forget the Mediterranean.

