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The Royal Navy and The Siege of Bilbao

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BOOK REVIEWS

Cable, James *The Royal Navy and The Siege of Bilbao*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1979, 219pp.

Taking as his subject what Hugh Thomas termed "...this curious incident in the history of British shipping," James Cable has described vividly the events surrounding the siege of the Basque capital by Franco's forces in the spring and summer of 1937 during the Spanish Civil War as "an essentially British tale and from a standpoint that is deliberately insular." The central theme of *The Royal Navy and the Siege of Bilbao* is the limited use of naval force, otherwise than as an act of war, to promote the aims of British foreign policy. According to Cable: "As a demonstration of the prolonged application of naval force for political ends, the operations off the north coast of Spain must be reckoned as a model of their kind." Viewed from this perspective, the episode reveals how the British Government was able to use limited naval force to promote the aims of its foreign policy, while at the same time furthering broader humanitarian interests.

In order to understand the background of these events, it is worth recalling that in the mid-thirties Britain could still lay a claim, however, tenuous, to independence to exercise its naval force as a great power. This was a period when the Royal Navy assumed that it could go where it pleased at sea, because "its uses [were] no concern to foreigners." Although the government hoped that it could treat this war "with complete detachment," Britain and her navy soon assumed a reluctant role as "honest broker of human lives and liberty." Whereas the initial task given to the Royal Navy was to escort British nationals out of Spain, His Majesty's ships rapidly became responsible for ensuring the safety of thousands of

Spanish children in their flight from war across the Bay of Biscay.

Explaining how this situation arose is not easy. In trying to do so Cable devotes considerable attention to an attempt to understand the intricacies of how British policy concerning the blockade of Bilbao was formulated. He describes with skill the often confusing discussions on this subject that took place among Ministers during the spring and summer months of 1937. Noting that in this period, as in others, no "clear-cut and consistent policy emerged," Cable, with access to the records of the Admiralty and Foreign Office as well as the minutes of discussions of cabinet and its committees, observes finally that British policy "...evolves, or it crystallises, by processes that are biological or chemical, rather than logical." He concludes that even the cabinet minutes themselves fail to show a "complete comprehension" of the whole story on the part of Ministers because, among other things, cabinet meetings either "...broke up too soon or their Secretary, Sir Rupert Howarth, lacked Lord Hankey's courage in making explicit what Ministers had felt but failed to express."

On the other hand, however, Cable commends the "men on the spot," in particular the efforts of the British Consul, Mr. Stevenson, who exhibited by any standard unusual courage and fortitude in a difficult and dangerous situation. The role played by this consul is given considerable attention by Cable in order to illustrate how British representatives in the field still acted on their own initiative. Moreover, in the character of this civil servant, for whom duty was to be done for its own sake, is, in Cable's estimation, an insight into the behavior of the mandarin class, whose rigid code existed to provide "...the honourable task of maintaining for Britain a degree of international

authority disproportionate to her resources." Cable has as well no less praise for the actions taken by naval officers who, in face of confusing orders, inadequate communication and insufficient guidance and direction, demonstrated a high degree of "good sense" and "calculated boldness." Through the efforts of such men, thousands of Spanish children—"all fervent little Reds"—were evacuated to sanctuary in France, England and elsewhere.

In writing this book Cable has vividly recounted a little known episode, focusing his attention equally upon the political and human aspects of a "curious," but fascinating incident, itself, as the author points out, now a historical case study of the results that flowed from the interaction of naval operations and political attitudes in a bygone time.

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Coles, Alan. *Three Before Breakfast*. Homewell, Havant, Hampshire, Eng.: Kenneth Mason, 1979. 192pp.

The review of this book in the May-June 1980 issue of the *Review* failed to note that the distributor in the United States is Sheridan House, White Plains, New York.

Cooke, O.A., comp., *The Canadian Military Experience 1867-1967: A Bibliography*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence: Directorate of History, 1979. Occasional Paper Number Two. 244pp.

The military experience of our closest neighbor is something that should be of great interest to us. However, we have remained largely ignorant of the subject; indeed, there are those who assume that Canadians are an unmilitary people. There are several reasons for this. On one hand, no general

bibliographic aids to research have been useful in guiding us to the full range of materials in print and, on the other hand, there have been relatively few substantive works on the subject.

O.A. Cooke's bibliography fills an important gap by removing some of the practical obstacles to study and pointing out approximately 2,200 titles that relate to the Canadian Armed Forces between Confederation in 1867 and the unification of the services, 100 years later, in 1967. Complementing the few well-known titles by such historians as R.A. Preston, C.P. Stacey, G.F.G. Stanley and G.N. Tucker, there are a host of monographs, pamphlets, serial titles, unit magazines and yearbooks, training pamphlets and regulations.

The bibliography is divided into five sections. The first lists bibliographies of military history and several suggestions for sources in political and social affairs that touch on the military. The second section deals with Defense policy and general works. These two sections, in particular, have been rather arbitrary in their listing of works that are "mainly or uniquely Canadian and military." They must be supplemented with broader and more general materials that cover politics, economics, sociology and international relations.

The remaining three sections of the bibliography are devoted to the naval, land and air forces. Of these, the army has been allotted 140 pages, the air force 33, and the navy 30. Each section has been divided into chronological segments: 1867-1914, 1914-1918, 1919-1945, and 1945-1967. In these segments, as well as in all the five categories of the entire bibliography, titles have been repeated in every section to which they pertain.

There is no question that this bibliography is a major contribution in the field of military history. It is a work for every reference library in the field and its low cost (\$5.95 in Canada and \$7.15 outside Canada) makes it readily