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Southern spoils

Review by Mark Mazower

Why were Britain's imperial planners so determined to control the Mediterranean?

Blue-Water Empire: The British in the Mediterranean Since 1800, by Robert Holland, *Allen Lane, RRP£25, 464 pages*

Things worked differently in the empire's heyday. Robert Jackson was a young naval lieutenant serving in Malta in the 1930s when he wrote a paper criticising Whitehall plans to abandon the fortress in the event of war. The admiral in charge happened to be his tennis partner. "What's all this balls?" he asked as he perused it, then gave his verdict: "Tennis at 15.30."

The paper moved up the Whitehall food chain and Malta held out against an Axis onslaught three years later, despite being bombed more intensively than London during the Blitz. By then Jackson, still under 30, had been put in overall charge of the island's supply system. He would go on to become one of the great international troubleshooters of the postwar era.

Malta, the long-time headquarters of the British Mediterranean Fleet, was a natural training ground for the men of action who throng the pages of *Blue-Water Empire*. Look elsewhere for ship types, tales of life below deck or the technology of sea power. Robert Holland's real subject is British grand strategy and his point is you can't appreciate this unless you take the Mediterranean dimension into account. From the rise of Britain's maritime predominance there at the end of the 18th century to its end after the second world war, he tells this story through the history of its bases, fortresses, islands and protectorates.

It all really started with Malta, which was seized from the French in 1800 and then upgraded by the Victorians into an impregnable naval base, the centrepiece of the Mediterranean

strategy, as the second world war would prove. Gibraltar, by contrast, comes off as a simultaneous source of pride and bemusement. Cyprus was the kind of accident that can happen to any world power, swiped in 1878 from the Sultan in an act of supreme opportunism, and proving – like Palestine (another post-Ottoman theft) – much more trouble than it was worth. As for Alexandria, its flattening by British guns in 1882 was a reminder of the brute force that underpinned the whole show.

Violence runs like a dark thread through the book, from the destruction of the Turkish fleet at Navarino to the devastation of Port Said in 1956 that not only blasted the old British Navy House to smithereens but left hundreds of Egyptians dead. One of the last of the Cairo proconsuls, Lord Lloyd, remarked that when the jacarandas bloomed he always felt it was time to call in the navy. He was not alone. The roll-call of sea dogs who bombarded their way around the shores of the Med is too long for comfort. Acre and Athens join Alexandria on the unhappy list of victims and that is only the As. But the brutality reflected the fact that naval power is a very blunt political instrument. Relying on control of the sea – armies were for continentals – allowed the British only two modes of power management when things got rough – bombardment or blockade – and neither was for the squeamish.

Holland's main argument is that the Mediterranean was much more important strategically to the British than we now remember, and he conveys very effectively the oddity of the logic that turned its control into a Whitehall priority. It was never really about protecting the route to India, more about imperial reputation. What mattered deep down was making sure rival powers – meaning the French or the Russians – did not sail in instead. It was, in short, a spoiler's strategy and a pretty expensive one at that. Ports were always being won and then relinquished again once the thrill of war was past and the sheer uselessness of maintaining them became obvious. Where the British did stay on, as in Cyprus and Egypt, Whitehall parsimony undermined the talk of a civilising mission. It often took in the British themselves. But locals knew you did not need armed force to transform a country – just railways, the telegraph, steam ships and the printing press.

Holland is not really taken in either, even if he argues for empire's benefits more often than he needs to. But the mandarin style of the British ruling elite is seductive and his own prose is a touch redolent of those interwar bestsellers – Ronald Storrs' *Orientations,* perhaps, or Compton Mackenzie's *Greek Memories* – that line the shelves of second-hand bookstores in provincial English towns.

In their way, they prove his point that the Mediterranean entered British life just as deeply as the British entered the South's. Or perhaps *more* deeply. How lasting an impact the Empire really had is not easy to tell from Holland's mostly English-language sources since

these give us a much better sense of how the British saw things than of how they were seen. There are nice vignettes of Maltese and Ionian social life but this is mostly the view from the bridge or perhaps the consular terrace. One understands Ismet Inönkü, the tough-minded Turkish diplomat, whose response to yet another vice-regal intervention from Lord Curzon was: “Always the English voice.”

The sense that colonial rule was barring the way to modernity as much as it was opening it spurred resistance to the British. They in turn worked out their own response: a form of imperial control purpose-built for naval enforcement, one not based on military occupation, as in India, or on white colonial settlement (think East Africa or the Dominions), but rather through handpicked puppet kings presiding over jerry-rigged constitutions. Starting with sad King Otto in Greece, this was always a Mediterranean strategy. Malta, Gibraltar and Cyprus were too small but Egypt saw the system emerge in its full glory. Libya – not really discussed in this book – was the farcical final act.

Assigning kings to restive natives worked for a bit but after a while it created the kind of resentments that not even the Royal Navy could quieten down. The scuttle when it came was quick as the cold war cast its shadows over the wine-dark sea. Today even the US 6th Fleet, the real successor to the British, has been scaled back and Britain’s main claim to Mediterranean distinction is to head the list of most-unwanted tourists. Like Cyprus, Corfu and Egypt, Malta has been set free. Only Gibraltar still guards the blue waters – but from what is no longer clear.

Mark Mazower is professor of history at Columbia University. His new book, ‘Governing the World: The Rise and Fall of an Idea’, will be published by Penguin in the autumn