

**Michel Vergé-Franceschi, André Zysberg, Marie-Christine Varachaud, Les marins du Roi-Soleil, Paris (Perrin) 2023, 368 p. (Synthèses Historiques), ISBN 978-2-262-10015-5, EUR 24,00.**

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One of the great achievements of Louis XIV's reign was the creation of a navy that, for a short period of time, rivalled those of the United Provinces and England – the greatest maritime powers at the time. Louis had ambitions for his navy to dominate the seas as his armies dominated Western Europe. The story of the struggle to do so, the achievements and ultimate disappointment are well known. The reforms and organisational initiatives of Colbert, Seignelay, Louis and Jérôme de Pontchartrain; the design and construction of the ships; the operations of fleet and the evolution of strategic focus from *guerre d'escadre* to *guerre de course*, provide the spine of French naval history in this period. More recently, interest in the lives of the seamen and officers have attracted the attention of researchers, giving a fuller picture of conditions in the navy.

The significance of the period to the French navy is manifest in the continuing growth of scholarship on the subject, so this volume, by three eminent historians, is particularly welcome. In a relatively short space, they draw together much of this research, provide the broad context, and lay out the essential narratives and analysis for the reader to understand the growth, development, and achievements of Louis's navies. The authors see three distinct navies created during Louis's reign. The first (1660–1678), the »apprenticeship« navy, emerged as Colbert put the institutions in place to support an expanding naval force. The second (1689–1692) was built to incorporate the lessons of the Franco-Dutch War (1672–1678) and mount a decisive naval challenge to the Anglo-Dutch enemy. The last (gradually developed), with its shift to small squadrons attacking enemy trade or carrying out defined missions, represented a recognition that lack of funds now precluded any hope of matching the Anglo-Dutch fleets in a prolonged naval war.

To explain this trajectory, the authors show that while the French crown's engagement with the ocean and seas goes back centuries, it was always constrained by the demands of continental warfare and diplomacy, and by domestic political compromises. By the time Colbert was struggling to construct state naval power, he had to negotiate with maritime communities that retained strong local, feudal and Protestant power bases. This was fundamental to how the naval institutions eventually worked. Louis' vision of his fleet was that of a uniform, royal and Catholic force. From the start Colbert was pragmatic enough to know that he had to compromise with religious and local interests to build naval power, but after Colbert's death in 1683 and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes



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the following year, the drive to achieve Louis' Catholic navy drove out Protestant maritime expertise from all corners of the fleet. Seignelay's other reforms could not compensate for these losses and, ultimately, other compromises had to be made to harness the natural maritime resources of France to achieve a degree of naval power.

The authors explore various aspects of this naval development, highlighting the differences between intentions, policies, and their impacts. A statistical examination of officer corps shows the difference between royal intentions and the reality. Although the nobility predominated, it was not overwhelmingly so. Indeed, overall, commoners made up over fifty percent of Louis' officers. Nor were they all bred to the sea. The maritime provinces certainly provided most of the officers, but about a third came from provinces not associated with the sea.

The backgrounds and experience of the ships' crews are also examined in detail. The famous *inscription maritime*, introduced to provide a rational, fair means of spreading the obligations to serve the crown's ships amongst the seafaring communities of France, was not as uniform or effective as had been hoped. The need to compromise with port cities meant that the inscription fell heavier on some areas than others. It did not carry with it the brutal coercion of the English »press gangs«, but seamen still fled from their obligations, and the fact that the inscription only encompassed administratively defined seamen, meant that it did not sweep into the navy landsmen who eventually graduated as capable seamen that would swell the pool of maritime labour.

The authors deal in detail with daily life at sea in Louis' navy. Much of that life was common to seamen of most European navies. They lived and fought on ships that were like those of their enemies and they fought battles with outcomes that were as dramatic and traumatic. Where the French navy differed from their Protestant adversaries was the care of the souls of the seamen. The rituals and ceremonies provided some spiritual comfort and breaks from the monotony of routines at sea, but ensuring religious conformity had a political as well as a spiritual purpose. Combatting the inclinations of the Protestant seafaring communities extended far beyond the royal fleet to encompass the merchant marine and control of this was contended by various religious orders, weakening their effectiveness. The priests who served on warships have often had a poor reputation in histories, but the authors contend that many were courageous and dedicated to the well-being of their flock.

The last section of the book takes the reader through a narrative of the wars from 1672 to 1713 to show how the French navy evolved. Ultimately, the authors conclude that, despite many successes, the ambition failed. The resources of maritime France, many of which were wasted in the drive for religious conformity or lost to local interests, were inadequate for the task. While the Royal Navy was becoming a truly oceanic state force, Louis' navy was unable,



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organisationally, or strategically, to break out of its limitations. Nevertheless, the basic structure of state naval power that enabled a late flowering of Bourbon naval power between 1778–1783 was put in place. This book provides an excellent study for anyone who wishes to understand Louis' navies and is a very welcome addition to the literature on the topic.



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