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N. 7
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Fascicolo 27. Luglio 2026
Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
GIAMPIERO BRUNELLI



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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma

Contatti: direzione@nam-sigm.org ; virgilio.ilari@gmail.com

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(www.societaitalianastoriamilitare@org)

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Vienna, Monumento equestre al Principe Eugenio di Savoia, particolare.
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ANNA BRINKMAN,

***Balancing Strategy.
Sea Power, Neutrality, and Prize Law
in the Seven Years' War.***

Cambridge Military Histories Series. Cambridge, 2024, pb. 2025.

Pp. x+288. £85.00 (hardcover), £29.99 (paperback).



A subtle and thoughtful book that deserves much attention. This is because of its conceptual interest, its ability to collapse disciplinary boundaries, and its determination to contextualise and problematise law. Indeed, law is moved from the autonomy of legal studies in order to understand its role as weapon as well as rhetoric and practice. Brinkman, at the time of writing, Lecturer in the Defence Studies Department at King's College London, assesses, from the records of the Court of Prize Appeal, the nature of British wartime commercial pressure on France during the Seven Years' War (1756-

63) within the context of the broader strategic need not to offend neutrals, in this case Spain and the United Provinces (Dutch Republic). This issue was important because using “neutral bottoms” was a way to avoid blockade and privateering. Thus the Court had to decide whether ships and their cargoes had been captured legally. The criterion developed was that of continuing peacetime conditions, in that trade that neutrals did not allow during peacetime should not be permitted in wartime. As states followed systems of imperial protectionism, this would block France using neutral shipping in order to retain links with their colonies.

This system worked, Brinkman argues, in that the Dutch accepted the solution and remained neutral throughout the war while Spain did not enter on the side of France until 1762. This, however, is pushing her excellent work too far, as there were many factors behind the decisions of the two powers. This, unfortunately, is a common problem in scholarship. Brinkman really should have devoted more attention to the range of reasons for neutrality, not least, in the case of the Dutch, for political divisions, the burden of recent wars, and concern about neighbouring Prussia. There is, indeed, an excess of navalism in her approach. So also with Spain and, notably, tensions between Ferdinand VI and France, differences in Italy, and the change that came with the accession of the anglophone Charles III in 1759. A good book, very good on its topic, but there is much more to say about context and consequences: international relations and developments were not solely, or even largely a consequence of British policy, let alone applied navalism.

Many of those who read this journal will look at mid-century from the perspective of earlier decades. Here, the most significant issue was that of changing views toward the Dutch. This was not a consequence of the Tories coming to the fore, for the Old Corps Whigs continued to be dominant until the fall of Thomas, Duke of Newcastle in 1762. Moreover, the key figure discussed by Brinkman, Philip, 1st Earl of Hardwicke, was both a Whig and a close ally of Newcastle. But the Whigs had come a long way in their response to the Dutch since the War of the Spanish Succession. In part this was a matter of the Whigs absorbing (some) Tory themes, which was an aspect of (some) Walpolean attitudes and politics, not least as radical alternatives were put to one side. The Dutch came with the Whigs into alliance with France from 1716, and remained linked when France was abandoned in 1731. Yet, the emotional appeal of Dutch cooperation had gone in part as a consequence of social and religious changes, with the Whig leadership very

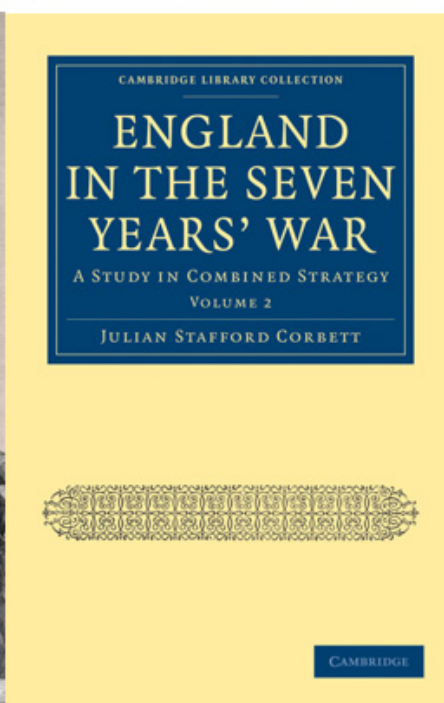
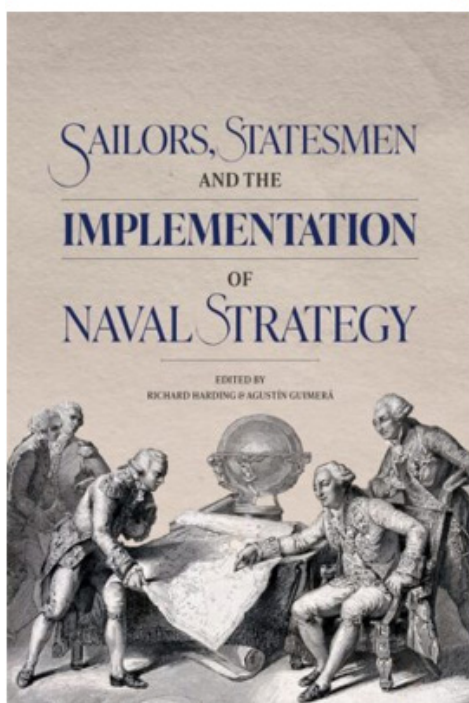
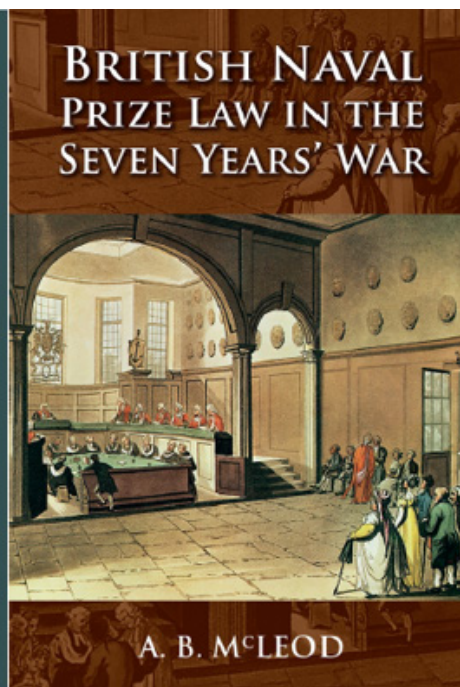
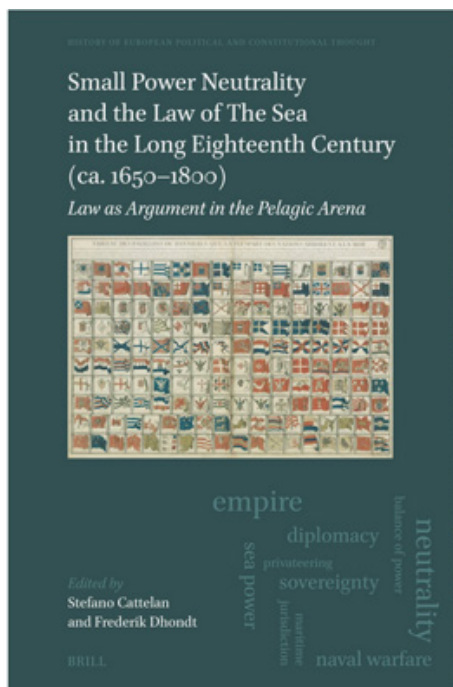
different to earlier Low Church tendencies. There was also growing distance in time terms from the cooperation against France in 1689-1712 and the willingness of the Dutch to send help against the Jacobites.

The breakdown with the Dutch came first in 1739 when they provided no help to the British when they went to war with Spain and then again in 1747-8 when British support for the Orangist takeover of Holland and Zeeland was followed by bitter disillusionment about the Dutch inability to provide promised assistance. Dutch neutrality in the Seven Years' War took this process further, and there was an anger that played a role in the public debate and could do with more discussion. It looked toward the two states going to war in 1780-84.

That is the dimension that could do with more discussion. It is not Brinkman's prospectus, but this dimension deserves extensive consideration, for ministers were guided by far more than prudential considerations alone.

Brinkman's conclusions need to be more fully integrated into a wider general account of the Seven Years' War, thereby requiring the author to confront some of the consequences of a maritime emphasis. However, younger scholars are not frequently given the encouragement or opportunity to take on larger topics in the modern ecosystem of academic production.

JEREMY BLACK
University of Exeter, Emeritus





Johann Georg Ziesenis (1716-1776). Portrait of Friedrich the Great (1763).
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Storia Militare Moderna

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