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The long story of a small German island in the North Sea

The archipelago of Heligoland has a modern parallel

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Heligoland: Britain, Germany and the Struggle for the North Sea. By Jan Ruger. *OUP; 370 pages; $34.95 and £25.*

AS A historical oddity, the story of Heligoland—a partly populated lump of rock in the North Sea—is worth readers' attention. Its rust-red cliffs were

ruled mostly by Danes until 1807. Then Britain seized the island, just 46km (29 miles) off the continental coast, using it as a forward base to break Napoleon's economic blockade. Otto von Bismarck, a Prussian statesman, craved the outcrop, and in 1890 Britain ceded it to Germany in exchange for a free hand in the former slave-trading sultanate of Zanzibar.

In these upheavals Heligoland's inhabitants (today they number roughly 1,400) were never consulted. It seems they cared little, as long as preferential taxes and steady flows of visitors from the mainland continued to let them prosper. Even under British control, Heligoland was a beloved destination for throngs of German romantic painters, musicians, pamphleteers and poets. A poem written on the island by Hoffmann von Fallersleben, in August 1841, became the lyrics of Germany's national anthem. Day-tripping tourists crowded its spa resorts and celebrated pollen-free air, gambling and dancing.

For Jan Ruger, the author of a brisk account of the past two centuries on Heligoland, the island matters for reasons more serious than its remote peculiarity. He calls Heligoland "an apt location from where to rethink the Anglo-German past." It is indeed a good vantage point. When ties were friendly, as in the last decade of the 19th century, the island saw remarkable intermingling of German and British customs, language and laws. At the time, though living under the German flag,

Heligolanders could even elect to be British citizens and serve in the Royal Navy.

Then during periods of antagonism, notably in the first half of the 20th century, the island became a symbol of bitter confrontation between two of Europe's strongest powers. Before the first world war British newspapers and politicians including Churchill vowed there must be "no more Heligolands", lamenting the decision to cede even the smallest territory to a rising enemy. Germany made the island a "monument" to nationalism, writes Mr Ruger. By the 1920s Hitler and Goebbels liked to be seen visiting the island, from which they would gaze over the sea towards Britain. Pro-Nazi painters depicted muscular eagles soaring above Heligoland's cliffs. In both the wars, Germany fortified the rock and built mammoth harbours for submarines and ships. After each war, Britain flattened the place.

Mr Ruger makes his case that Heligoland's fortunes are a useful bellwether of wider relations and he relates his story in an engaging style. Wisely, he never quite suggests that the island—even as a military outpost—was of much more than symbolic importance. Heavily fortified Heligoland did not prevent Britain's navy, for example, from blockading Germany from afar in the first world war.

More people should know Heligoland's story for the echoes it has today. The late 19th century saw an emerging, militaristic great power, with a fast-

growing navy, eager to exploit a speck of land in the ocean even if that provoked an established global power. Much the same is happening with China, as it militarises atolls in the South China Sea. Frantic debates in Britain, just over a century ago, about Germany's intentions in Heligoland, sound strikingly similar to discussion today, in America, over China's rise. Geopolitics, like history, has a habit of repeating itself.

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