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This thesis focuses on the foreign seamen who served in the Royal Navy during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1793-1815). It is a transnational social history of eighteenth-century state power, warfare, and migration, examining the legal terms of ‘foreigners’’ naval employment, the political and diplomatic background, cultural and social integration, and the demographic characteristics of these men.

The conclusions are as follows. First, studying these aspects transforms our conception of the Navy. Simply taking for granted the Navy’s ‘Britishness’, and failing to explore its position in an international maritime labour marketplace, can leave our understanding of its social history incomplete. Second, the power of the eighteenth-century state had to make important compromises, when it came to the cross-border movement of certain individuals, because of its need for resources. In times pre-dating the rise of the modern anti-mercenary norm, cosmopolitanism was disciplined and accommodated in ingenious and flexible ways within the Navy – a military institution which, albeit part of a transnational maritime world, was by definition a heavily ‘nationalised’ space. Third, this thesis shows the methodological value of deconstructing the term ‘foreigner’, as it developed in late eighteenth-century Europe and America, using the Navy as a case study.

To avoid essentialising the concept of ‘foreigner’, each chapter tackles a different meaning of the word, questioning how far the characteristics attached to it would have affected someone’s situation in the Navy. Chapter 1 shows that recruits with birthplace in other countries were not radically dissimilar to their British colleagues in age, skill, or rating in the Navy. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 argue that legal and cultural ‘foreignness’ (defined in terms of language, religion, and racialised physical difference) was easily ignored, bypassed or even put to use by the Navy, interested in maximising its efficient use of manpower. Chapters 5 and 6 are case studies on the integration of southern and northern European seamen respectively. Chapter 7 demonstrates that ‘foreignness’ defined in contingent terms, the lived social experience of immigration, travel, and displacement, was a crucial respect in which ‘foreign’ sailors may have been unlike their colleagues, dealing with different options, needs, motivations, and opportunity costs.