

## The Armoured Commerce Raider 1914-1942. The mirage of an indirect path to victory for the weaker navy?

*“As the primary objective in naval war is the enemy transport capacity and his sea lines of communication, there will also be operational possibilities against a superior opponent without an initial defeat of his battle fleet ...”<sup>1</sup>*



Panzerschiff DEUTSCHLAND. (commons.wikimedia.org)

Operation “*Weserübung*”, the German strategic coup against Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940 has been seen as inspired by the writings of Wolfgang Wegener during and after World War I, as he recommended the expansion of his navy’s narrow base of operation by gaining access to North Sea bases in the Nordic States. The idea of a bright officer from the service periphery inspiring strategic doctrine by bypassing the correct formal channels is, however, fundamentally naïve. It ignores the automatic negative reaction of senior officers and colleagues in any military bureaucracy to somebody that is seen acting in a disloyal and self-promoting way. In a peace-time military critical widely circulated writings of a young or midcareer officer are most likely to be disregarded as signs of arrogance, immaturity or lack of access to the “full picture” (including the political realities in the capital). Later in the critic’s life they might be ignored as driven by career frustrations. In war-time implicit criticism of the service leadership is intolerable and dangerous. A service leadership may encourage and reward internal elite debate to keep it flexible and identify talent, however neither Tirpitz’ war-time *Kaiserliche Marine* nor Raeder’s peace-time *Reichmarine* can be considered particularly tolerant of challenges to the dogmas of the service’s leaders. This was a natural reaction of an organisation under siege by a hostile and perceived ignorant environment dominated by the army; however the situation may also have been influenced by the necessity in all navies of unquestioned acceptance of the command authority of the captain. If Wegener *seems* to have had influence in 1916 and

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<sup>1</sup> Memorandum “Seekriegführung gegen England und die sich daraus ergebenden Forderungen für die strategische Zielsetzung und den Aufbau der Kriegsmarine” of 25.10.1938. In: Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935-1945. Band III: Denkschriften und Lagebetrachtungen 1938-1944. Ed. by Michael Salewski Frankfurt a. M. 1973, p.32.

late 1920s, it was because he was just putting ideas into writing that already had a widespread, but tacit, support among his more disciplined contemporaries. He might have catalysed their slide to greater clarity. The other element of his memoranda besides the importance of “position” - the necessary focus on the sea lines of communication – was such an idea.<sup>2</sup> It was another consequence of the importance of the sea lines of communication that later motivated the elite of the *Kriegsmarine* and its chief and drove it towards the oceans via the route along the Norwegian coast. From 1927 the central service elite concentrated on the practical “tools” necessary to use any improved geo-strategic position. If the right solution could be found, the navy would have a significant influence on the outcome of a future war and avoid its humiliating World War I failure.

When the new war threatened and thereafter broke out in 1939, the military and political leaders all sought inspiration in what had worked, what had failed or what should have been tried in order to succeed two decades earlier. For the military professionals the twenty years after World War I became increasingly dominated by deep beliefs in simple formulas for how to fight and win the next war guided by one strategic concept. Most air force enthusiasts considered it self-evident beyond the need for debate that terror bombardment of capitals would trigger a slide into panic, revolution and surrender. Later American army airmen convinced themselves that precision bombardment of the industrial hubs of the enemy would force him to give up fighting. On land the French Army sought a defensive victory that might include limited offensives made realistic by managed use of fire and deliberate movement. The reduced and resource starved British army had to concentrate on policing the increasingly disturbed empire, challenged, however, by reformers without responsibility like Liddell-Hart, who advocated his simple and elegant solutions and convinced both more shallow military professionals and the lay: all approaches had to be indirect, one such carrier of victory could be Fuller’s somehow freely manoeuvring small all-machine army. The German army thought that tactical opportunism and cadre excellence coupled with new technology would deliver decisive victory by manoeuvre thus avoiding another industrial mass slogging match. Both the U.S. Navy and Imperial Japanese Navy still prepared victory in the Pacific via a decisive naval battle with battleships. Even the Royal Navy that faced a multitude of challenges with an aging fleet and lack of control over its aviation spent much mental energy re-fighting Jutland. All focused on one service tactics and operations and left strategy to the politicians. In the liberal democracies the leaders no longer considered it proper or relevant to theorise about something they intended to avoid.

When war came in spite of their beliefs and efforts, the political leaders of many European countries that had held key positions twenty years earlier sought to apply their preferred lessons directly. The Scandinavian leaders had made themselves believe that they had kept their countries from involvement by balanced and still pragmatic and opportunistic neutrality, and they used that simplified understanding directly in the new war. The Finns and Poles had succeeded in a military defence of their newly gained independence. The Baltic States had rather miraculously gained full independence rather than autonomy due to the intervention of great powers in their support: Estonia and Latvia from first Germany and thereafter and decisively Britain, Lithuania from first Germany and thereafter equally decisively the Soviet Union and the U.S. It might be possible to follow the same line surviving in the threatening conflict, the Finns and Poles by fighting, the Balts by trusting their good fortune.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael H. Clemmesen, *Den lange vej mod 9. april. De fyrre år før den tyske operation mod Norge og Danmark i 1940*. Odense 2010, pp. 120-125, 492-494.

Churchill as newly reappointed First Lord of the Admiralty regressed to his 1913-1915 frenetic and nearly Pavlovian pressure for early offensive action employing whatever innovative technical development that might work. He thereby sought inspiration in the 1917-18 Admiralty plan studies for operations into the Baltic and against enemy supplies carried along the Norwegian coast, understanding neither the effect of modern air power against surface vessels nor the strategic consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The First Lord was kept in check firstly by colleagues in the cabinet that ardently hoped to avoid escalation into another total and uncontrollable war as the one that had taken place from 1916 onwards and secondly by the fact that the First Sea Lord, Dudley Pound, was well prepared to handle his active boss. He knew Churchill from service as admiral John Fisher's assistant in the Dardanelles spring of 1915 and was familiar with all premises of the Admiralty planning of 1917 and 1918 from his time first as Deputy Director of the Planning Division and thereafter as Operations Director of the then newly formed Naval Staff.

However, in the winter 1940 planning for operations in Scandinavia both the Cabinet and the service chiefs failed to understand the destructive effect that the interwar concepts of no major war the next ten years and thereafter no significant deployment to the Continent had had on especially British Army unit combat readiness and leadership quality.

### ***The German naval elite's vision developing***

The article traces the chosen powerful main guiding idea for the recreation of the German surface navy: the use of highly capable capital ships independently and directly in the struggle about the sea lines of communication, interrupting enemy use and - when and where relevant and possible - also protecting own use with the available main units. It was a third way naval war concept for the weaker navy, different from both the *Young School* of naval warfare with its attrition through stealth and raids against coasts and commerce - detested by serious professionals of ambitious navies - and the inactivity of the *Fleet-in-being* - impossible to explain to a glory seeking public, ineffective against a blockade and demoralising to the service cadre. This strategic idea came to dominate the first two years of the European naval war. Its foundation in relation to the German Navy was the autumn 1914 observation of the captain of the battle cruiser SMS VON DER TANN, Max Hahn. Probably directly inspired by the exploits of the EMDEN<sup>3</sup> in the Indian Ocean and the outcome of the Battle of Coronel<sup>4</sup> and frustrated by the enforced passivity in the North Sea created by the British distant blockade and the lack of usable operational ideas by the otherwise active father of the *Kaiserliche Marine*, the Naval Secretary, Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Hahn suggested that battle cruisers might be employed as fast and powerful raiders against the enemy sea lines of communications. Both the squadron commander, vice-admiral Franz von Hipper, and his leading staff officer, lieutenant commander Erich Raeder, were charmed by the concept, which the latter had the chance to study in depth a short time after the war when detached for political reasons to work as the official historian of the cruiser warfare of the ships of vice-admiral Maximilian von Spee's East Asia Squadron. He then saw a potential link between the distant success of raiders and aggressive operations in the North Sea.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the following, the paper will often refer to the short factual Wikipedia articles, her:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMS\\_Emden\\_\(1908\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMS_Emden_(1908)), rather than earlier, more comprehensive works.

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Coronel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Coronel)

<sup>5</sup> Jost Döffler, Weimar, Hitler und die Marine. Reichspolitik und Flottenbau 1920-1939. Düsseldorf 1973, p. 100.



Maximilian Graf von Spee and the inspired Erich Raeder in 1928. (www.maritimequest.com & commons.wikimedia.org)

Some members of the key department (the *Flottenabteilung*, the small replacement of the dissolved *Admiralstab*) in the *Reichmarine* management were already inspired by the concept during Admiral Hans Zenker's command of the service. The idea to build a "*Linienschiffkreuzer*" of 10.000 tons with 28 cm cannon within the Versailles limitations that could act as a tool had first been outlined by Brigadenführer Wilfried von Lövenfeld in September 1926,<sup>6</sup> however due to the limitations of domestic politics the project had to wait two years. Building capable *blue water* vessels with its main mission in the Atlantic<sup>7</sup> would underline the German desire to regain equal rights as a great power.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after Erich Raeder had been promoted to succeed Zenker on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1928 from his previous post as commander in the Baltic, he started working to have the idea of a capable blue water vessel approved politically and thereafter realised.<sup>9</sup> He was initially limited by having to give priority to operations against Poland in the Baltic and France in the North Sea and thereafter by the far too early naval war against Britain. From the early 1930s onwards Raeder focused on armoured raider operations until forced to resign New Year 1943 and replaced by Karl Dönitz when the concept's weaknesses under the existing conditions had become evident.

### ***The original roots: The French-Russian threat and Fisher's response***

Completing the research for the recently published book about the strategic history of Scandinavia and the North Sea 1890-1940,<sup>10</sup> it became increasingly clear how much the idea of using fast capital ships against trade inspired, drove and guided the naval events in European waters of the first years of the World War II, including *Weserübung*, *Mers-el-Kebir* and the possible and actual operations against allied shipping on the trans-Atlantic routes and later the American-British Arctic Convoys to the Murmansk-Archangelsk area.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 84.

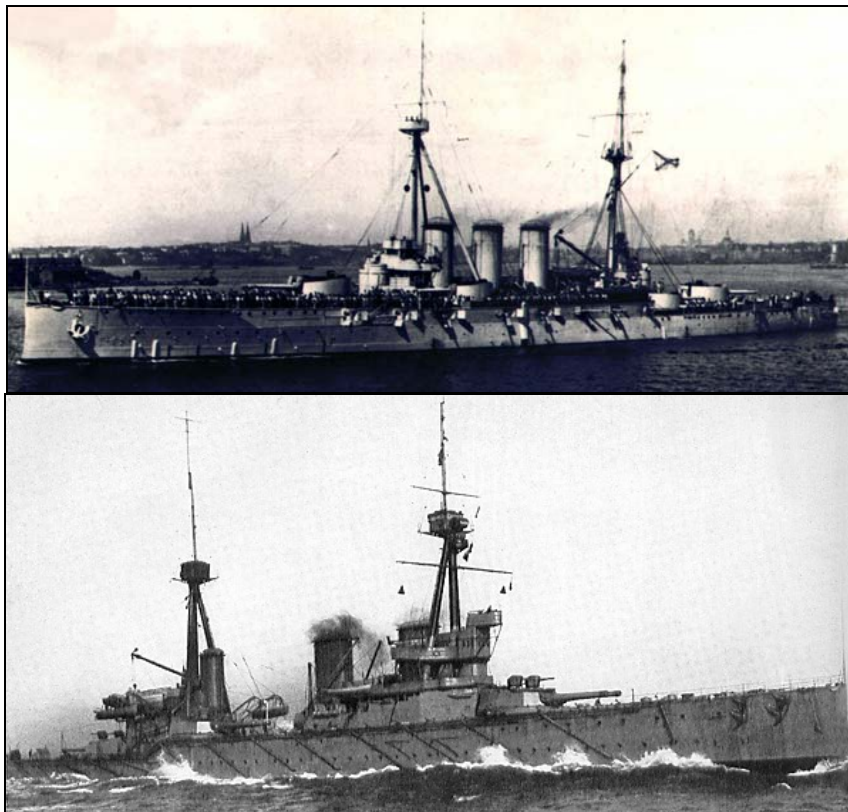
<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Treue, Eberhard Möller and Werner Rahn: *Deutsche Marinerüstung 1919-1942. Die Gefahren der Tirpitz-Tradition*, Herford & Bonn 1992, pp.72, 75.

<sup>8</sup> Werner Rahn, "German Naval Strategy and Armament, 1919-39", in: *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. by Phillips Payson O'Brien (London 2001), pp. 109-127.

<sup>9</sup> Rolf Güth, *Die Marine des Deutschen Reiches 1919-1939*, Frankfurt am Main, 1972, pp. 84-92.

<sup>10</sup> Den lange vej mod 9. april. De fyrrer år før den tyske operation mod Norge og Danmark i 1940.

As Nicholas Lambert has argued convincingly,<sup>11</sup> it was the threat from the increasingly large and powerful armoured cruisers of Britain's potential enemies that had guided the combination of structure rationalisation and fleet concentration reform that the new First Sea Lord John Fisher had started in 1904. The French navy was building a significant force of the large and fast armoured cruisers of the GUEYDON, GLOIRE and especially the LEON GAMBETTA classes, the latter of 12.400 tonnes, and from the Vickers yard Russia had ordered the still larger and more powerful armoured cruiser RURIK of 15.170 tonnes with a main armament four 10 inch guns and a secondary battery of 8 guns of 8 inch calibre. The Russian ship was more capable than the three newest British armoured cruisers of the MINOTAUR class and nearly matched the new KING EDWARD VII class battleship in size as well as armament, and it was more than two knots faster. It is hardly a coincidence that the force that Fisher developed as part of the response to the potential threat to the choke points of the trade routes: the battle cruisers of the INVINCIBLE class, had much in common with the RURIK, but they were 2.000 tonnes larger and four knots faster thanks to the new steam turbines, and with their eight 12 inch cannon had twice the punch of any earlier battleship.



RURIK (top), HMS INVINCIBLE (bottom). ([www.bismarck-class.dk](http://www.bismarck-class.dk) & [www.cityofart.net](http://www.cityofart.net))

The new ships would be dispatched from a home based pool in the necessary number to meet a specific threat, informed and controlled by the ever improving network of British telegraph and wireless telegraphy stations.

To match the new fast British battlecruisers, the German navy started to build similar vessels after a pause of a couple of years that they used to decide the role and design characteristics – especially the calibre of the main armament - of the new type of ship, information that Fisher had deliberately tried to obscure. As the

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999. Plus his article *Strategic Command and Control for Maneuver Warfare: Creation of the Royal Navy's "War Room" System, 1905-1915*. In: *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Apr., 2005)

German naval leadership decided that they should be able to work as a fast wing of the High Seas Fleet, more emphasis was given to protection. The first vessel completed was Max Hahn's VON DER TANN. She was bigger than the INVINCIBLE, similar to the later INDEFATIGABLE class, but due to her significantly better protection; she was slower than the British ships. In the follow-on ships the different roles meant that the German ships were a little slower and had a far shorter range than the British vessels of similar size, but class after class they remained better protected. The shorter range meant that the German vessels were less suitable for trade war, more dependent on bases or supply ships than the British vessels. As this was not their foreseen role, the limitation was logical.

### ***The German East Asia Squadron and conceptual development in the North Sea: Hahn, Hipper and Raeder***

The events off South America October-December 1914 that inspired the captain of VON DER TANN were a clear illustration of the correctness and effectiveness of Fischer's reforms a decade earlier as well as an important lecture in that respect for Winston Churchill, the First Lord of the Admiralty.

In spite of signals intelligence in early October indicating that Graf von Spee's East Asia Squadron would commence trade warfare against routes along the South American west coast, copying the success of the independently operating light cruiser EMDEN, the Admiralty under Churchill decided against reinforcing the Royal Navy South Atlantic Squadron with vessels superior to the German Armoured Cruisers SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU. The two German ships each had a standardised main armament of eight 21 cm cannon and were as their larger and faster successor BLÜCHER in reality an intermediate construction between the previous classes of armoured cruisers and the battlecruisers. Fisher had never made the main purpose of the his battlecruisers clear, so nobody knew that they had been built just for such counter armoured cruiser missions.

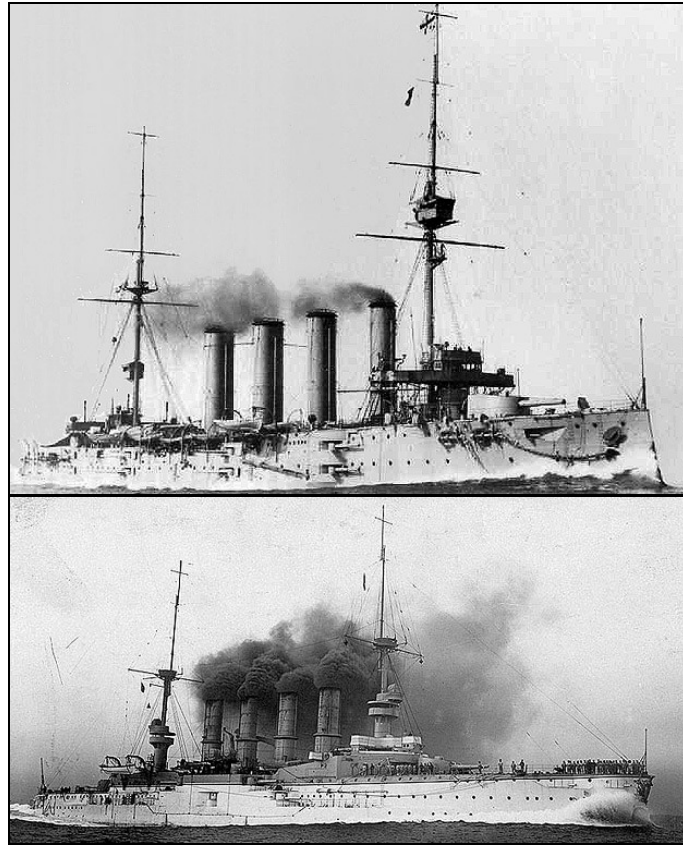
The massive superiority in heavy calibre guns meant disaster for Royal Navy, when the German squadron met the just seven years older armoured cruisers GOOD HOPE and MONMOUTH at Coronel on 1<sup>st</sup> November.<sup>12</sup> However, now John Fisher had returned as First Sea Lord, on 3<sup>rd</sup> November he had intelligence that the German squadron had been observed off Argentina, and a week later he dispatched his brainchildren, the INVINCIBLE and INFLEXIBLE to do what they had been designed to do. Von Spee waited too long to start on the return journey - just wanting to bomb Port Stanley before departure - and met his fate in the Battle of the Falklands on 8 December, less than a month after the two battlecruisers had left England.<sup>13</sup> In Raeder's analysis of the event for the official history he supposed that a more aggressive strategy of the High Seas Fleet in the North Sea could have prevented the dispatch of the two battlecruisers to the South Atlantic.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Coronel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Coronel)

<sup>13</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_the\\_Falkland\\_Islands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Falkland_Islands)

<sup>14</sup> Werner Rahn, Reichmarine und Landesverteidigung 1919-1928. Konzeption und Führung der Marine in der Weimarer Republik. München 1976, p.127.



Dramatic difference in a few years: HMS GOOD HOPE (top) and SMS SCHARNHORST (bottom) with standardised, heavy main battery.

([www.cityofart.net](http://www.cityofart.net) & [www.histarmar.com.ar](http://www.histarmar.com.ar))

### ***German experiments close to home 1917-1918***

In spring 1914 the ever quickly growing inferiority of his fleet had led Tirpitz to consider the creation of two trade warfare forces for Atlantic use, and he had half-heartedly repeated the possibility in August.<sup>15</sup> However, after fifteen years of stifling brainwashing the officers of the tightly disciplined service believed unquestionably in the dogma of victory through an aggressive employment of the battle fleet in the southern part of the North Sea. Even if these late doubts had been known to in the fleet, they could not change much in a fleet deliberately designed and trained for that mission, and the same applied to the discussion among the officers of Hipper's squadron. Any second and new thoughts about the use of the surface units would remain irrelevant until the Tirpitz retirement and the Battle of Jutland, which had highlighted the risks of the opportunistically pulsing fleet-in-being strategy of the High Seas Fleet. Both the fleet commander and the Kaiser understood that the good tactical result off Skagerrak had masked a near disaster, when the fleet had been close to being cut off and lost on the way back to the bases in the inner part of the German Bight. The experience highlighted the insight put into writing by Wegener in 1915 that the German Navy had to seek a far longer base of operations including the free use of the Kattegat-Skagerrak-Kiel Canal alternative route to its bases to enhance its chances against the Royal Navy. A couple of months after the battle operational planning against Denmark was resumed after having remained frozen by army opposition since early 1905.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Epkenhans, Die Kaiserliche Marine 14/15: Der Versuch der Quadratur des Kreises. In: Michael Epkenhans, Jörg Hillmann & Frank Nägler, Skagerrakschlacht. Vorgeschichte – Ereignis – Verarbeitung. München 2009, p. 132.

The initial new path to victory was by the resumption of unrestricted U-boat warfare, which was predicted by the chief of the *Admiralstab*, Henning von Holtzendorff, to force Britain out of the war in less than six months. However by late summer of 1917, more than a half year after the start of the U-boat campaign on 1<sup>st</sup> February, there were no signs of a collapse of the British will to fight on. On the contrary the entry of the U.S. on the enemy side had made the trade blockade of Germany even more effective than previously, something that the U-boat offensive could not influence in a decisive way, even if the boats had been able to sink several of the British cruisers of the North Sea blockade line. During the spring and summer the Royal Navy's mounting of increasingly effective convoy escorts had become a successful answer to the U-boats, triggering experiments with the use of a regular surface raider, where a convoy could be considered to be a helpful collection of targets.



SMS BRUMMER, one of the two successful North Sea raiders, but as the German battlecruisers with far too short range for Atlantic work. ([www.scapamap.org](http://www.scapamap.org))

The two very fast light cruisers BRUMMER and BREMSE were adapted to look as much as possible as British ships and launched against a Scandinavian Convoy on the way from Norwegian waters to Scotland on 17 October. Nine neutral steamers and both escorting destroyers were quickly destroyed by gunfire. In spite of a massive, if belated, employment of British forces the two cruisers returned unharmed to their base. Thereafter the German Navy considered repeating the success by attacking convoys elsewhere. One possibility analysed was the employment of a cruiser against convoys in the eastern Atlantic, using the Azores as a temporary base. However the limited range of the German ships, all designed for operations in the North Sea, ruled out such adventures and resulted in a second attack in the North Sea against the traffic between Britain and Scandinavia. On 12 December 1917 two groups of large powerful destroyers built using a design meant for the Imperial Russian Navy raided shipping off the English east coast and another Scandinavian Convoy. The latter attack led to a similar destruction as the October operation, even if one of the escorting destroyers escaped heavily damaged to Norwegian waters. The ever improving German radio technology and discipline as well as the short warning time due to the limited distance from the German bases made it nearly impossible for the Royal Navy to react in time with its superior forces, and it was thereafter forced to employ both light cruiser squadrons and battlecruiser or battleship divisions in distant support and back-up of the Scandinavian Convoys.



Finally, on 23-24 April 1918, the High Seas Fleet launched a massive raid against trade, sending its force of battlecruisers to destroy another Scandinavian Convoy. The battleships of the fleet followed, ready to give support. Delay due to fog meant that the raid only found an empty sea, and propeller shaft damage in MOLTKE led to early cancellation of the operation. If it had proceeded as planned, it could not only have met a light cruiser squadron supporting the convoy, but might also have engaged the 6<sup>th</sup> Battle Squadron composed of USN battleships. On that day it had formed the back-up force ready to counter heavy threats to the convoys. Due to the still limited gunnery training level of the U.S. ships, the result of contact could have been rather dramatic.

### ***British and American reactions to the threat***

As early as September 1917 the British Admiralty planners had considered the possibility of German employment of a battlecruiser against the Atlantic sea lines in spite of the fact that the character of the enemy ships made a realisation of the threat unlikely. However, the sally of the High Seas Fleet in late April 1918 brought the possibility to the top of the agenda of the allied navy planners in London. They recognised that it would be next to impossible to block the path of a single battlecruiser on the way to the Atlantic and understood that the raider's main constraint would be range, but if it could get access to fuel, it could do much damage. Steps should be taken immediately to protect troop and other key convoys by battleship escorts and create two reaction forces for hunting operations: one on the U.S. Atlantic coast and another that could be placed in a harbour in the south-western part of the British Isles. Still, the problem was from where those ships could come. The Grand Fleet had no surplus dreadnoughts for detachment.

On 6 May it was clear that the options were use of unemployed American battleships, French ones from the Mediterranean or the British designed Japanese battlecruisers of the KONGO class. On that day the planners had also realised that the German ships were flexible in their choice of fuel. They could burn either coal, brought along on a collier, or oil, possible by stopping an allied east-bound tanker. The Canary Islands or the Greenland coast could be used as a refuelling place. The allies not only needed battleship escorts for their most important Atlantic convoys and a reaction squadron in a properly located port to meet the threat, they also required a radio direction finding station on the Azores that could supplement those elsewhere.



An attractive raider hunter: The Imperial Japanese Navy battlecruiser KONGO, not available for U.S. use.  
([www.cityofart.net](http://www.cityofart.net))

The endeavour to work out detailed plans to counter German battlecruiser raiders thereafter became one of the main common projects of the combined British and American naval planners: the Admiralty Planning Division and the U.S. Navy Planning Section.

The first American analysis of the problem came 17 May in the form of a memorandum: the Germans would depart and return via the northern access to the Atlantic and probably use one of the newest battlecruisers. They were likely to use some of their large *cruiser U-boats* as scouts and bring a supply ship that would be used for supplementary fuelling just before the active part of the raid, where the most likely target would be the U.S. troop convoys. The allies should use as large part as possible of own destroyers to search for and keep contact with the raider.

The British planners considered it more likely that the Germans would seek re-supply by capture. The Grand Fleet's main task would be to find and destroy the raider on the return route to the North Sea bases. It would only be employed in search operations based on good intelligence, e.g. about a refuelling rendezvous. This was a logical conclusion that was forgotten by the Royal Navy decision-makers deploying the Home Fleet for a chase of possible raiders in a situation without real intelligence on 7. April 1940.<sup>16</sup>

The American planners had a complete plan ready on 10 August for the use of all American Dreadnought battleships not already deployed with the Grand Fleet. The oldest were to be employed in escort of high value convoys. A division of four modern ships should form a reaction force on the U.S. Atlantic coast together with the four Japanese KONGOs and another division of three modern vessels should form a similar force in Ireland.

The British planners noted that the Japanese would not accept a deployment of their most capable capital ships outside home waters. However, even if Royal Navy did not consider the American plan the best possible use of the ships, they accepted it without comments, happy that the U.S. Navy had agreed to use its entire battleship fleet in direct support of common objectives. As a result of the agreement, the three ships of the 6<sup>th</sup> Battleship Division deployed to Bereshaven in south-western Ireland later that month.<sup>17</sup>

## ***Until 1938***

By summer 1925 the conceptual focus for a possible French-German war had started to move from fleet engagements to trade warfare, and in February 1926 operations against enemy sea lines of communication were listed as the second of two navy missions, the first one being the protection of own sea lines. The development might have been catalysed by Wegener's renewed activity. As rear-admiral he was now naval artillery inspector. During spring 1927 the *Flottenabteilung* had defined the future vessel first outlined by von Lövenfeld in an internal guideline for new major unit construction. A hesitant Zenker had been convinced that the first couple of new heavy units should be what was later accurately characterised as the *kleinen Schlachtkreuzers* (small battle cruisers).<sup>18</sup> When Erich Raeder was appointed head of the navy on 1 October 1928 the strategic framework for the employment of his service was a possible war with Poland supported by its ally France, where Britain (as well as the U.S.) was expected to remain neutral. In his previous post as Commanding Admiral at the Kiel Naval Base Raeder's focus had been on operations against

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<sup>16</sup> S. W. Roskill, *History of the Second World War - THE WAR AT SEA 1939 - 1945 Volume 1: The Defensive*, London 1954, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> The information from my recently published book as been completed with documents about the combined RN-USN planning in summer 1918 found in The National Archives, UK (TNA). ADM 137/2710.

<sup>18</sup> Rahn, *Reichmarine*, p. 244.

Poland and well as French ships entering the Baltic. In Berlin Raeder focused immediately and with intense energy on developing a strategy and operational plan for the conflict against the Polish-French (and expected Danish) combination as well as on the creation of a more suitable tool than the partly obsolete fleet he had inherited. As already noted, the work had already started before Raeder's arrival in the form of studies and war gaming inside the navy, the latter centred on the struggle to ensure that the *Panzerschiffe* built to replace some of the pre-Dreadnought battleships was suitable within the naval elite's<sup>19</sup> fighting concept that was still developing.<sup>20</sup> As already mentioned, Raeder had personally been primed for armoured cruiser operations by the war-time debate in Hipper's squadron and his studies of cruiser warfare during the war.

The decision to build the first ship was taken in the spring of 1928 – thus before Raeder's arrival - by the newly elected Social Democrat chancellor; however the decision had not been confirmed until late November that year after a dedicated effort by Raeder during his first weeks in office. Even if construction of the first of the new ships started in the winter of 1929, the idea to build a fast, heavily armed, long range heavy cruiser instead of a modern coastal defence ship for use in the Baltic Sea against Poland continued to be challenged by the political left in the following months as a dangerous idea. Initially, in early October 1928, the primary mission of the coming vessel was described as the protection of German trade in the North Sea against enemy cruisers, a task clearly within the framework of the first navy mission.<sup>21</sup>

By 1932 the war games of the German Navy focused on attacking the French sea lines of communication after the destruction of the Polish Navy in the Baltic Sea early in the war. It was a mission that would start to become possible as the *Panzerschiffe* entered service. One may suspect that the naming of the third to fifth armoured ships: ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE, SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU in the next years marked the increasing clarity of doctrine.<sup>22</sup> The German planners realised that the most valuable target for German naval operations would be the communications in the western Mediterranean between France and its North African colonies, the very same sea lines that the French considered the object of attack by the new Italian heavy cruisers, however Raeder realised that Germany did not have access to bases suitable to support such operations. Even if Britain was still assumed to remain neutral, he also noted that if the German Navy had had the possibility to attack British trade by heavy surface vessels in the war, this would have forced the Royal Navy to accept battle. Increasingly applying the same logic as Wegener's 1929-book, Raeder focused on the need to secure bases for his future fleet of raiders and for the direct protection of incoming shipping to Germany.

During the years 1932-34 the German Navy's construction plans placed emphasis on increasing the number and power of the *Panzerschiffe* that were now also meant to operate against enemy trade, eventually to be supplemented by the heavy cruisers of the ADMIRAL HIPPER class.

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<sup>19</sup> Used for what Werner Rahn has grouped under the term "Marineführung" in *Reichmarine*, p.9.

<sup>20</sup> BAMA, RM/20/878, Letter of Wegener of 25-9-1925 to Zenker. Rahn, *Reichmarine*, pp. 107, 129-132, 139-140. Döffler, *Weimar, Hitler und die Marine*, pp. 185-189, 194.

<sup>21</sup> Rahn, *Reichmarine*, pp. 241-243

<sup>22</sup> Döffler, *Weimar, Hitler und die Marine*, pp. 370-371.



SCHARNHORST and BISMARCK were built to over-match the new French units in a general, direct fight for the sea lines of communication. (gl-w.blogspot.com & www.chuckhawks.com)

As described later, the French start of DUNKERQUE and STRASSBOURG led to the start of construction of SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU<sup>23</sup> that could take place legitimately from 1935 onwards within the framework of the British-German Naval Agreement as could the construction of BISMARCK, TIRPITZ, the first two of six battleships, and the first three heavy cruisers.

These ships should still be considered built against the Polish-French combination, where trade war could only have a supporting role to the main fighting on land. However, war-gaming in the mid-1930' makes likely that all heavy German vessels were thereafter planned used in different operations on the sea lines of communication in a war, the SCHARNHORST and BISMARCK classes with the option of directly protecting own high value convoys against French cruisers (as the British and U.S. battleships in the North Sea and older U.S. Dreadnoughts in the Atlantic in 1918) rather than as a means to win general control of the sea through deliberate seeking a major engagement.

From November 1937 onwards Britain was formally included by Hitler as a likely, future enemy, and this added dramatically to the requirements if the operations against enemy trade should be both realistic and potentially decisive. Raeder had argued earlier that year that the international situation could change in a far shorter time that it took to build his ships.<sup>24</sup> In a war against Germany, the Royal Navy could recreate a Northern Barrier between Norway and Scotland to support the resumption of a blockade, something that both underlined the requirement of forward bases in Denmark (as Wegener proposed, including the Faeroe Islands) and Norway, and it led to requirement to build both additional heavy units that could fight to keep the access to sea lines in the Atlantic open and a large number of more powerful long range raiders.

In order to be able to supply the surface raiders with what was necessary for an extended cruise, the German navy built a class of five very fast oil tanker and supply vessels between 1937 and 1939, one of which became known under the name ALTMARK.<sup>25</sup> They were auxiliary cruisers with a hidden main armament of three 15 cm cannon in addition to anti-aircraft weapons. The five ships gave the German Navy

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 171, 243-246, 373.

<sup>24</sup> Döffler, Weimar, Hitler und die Marine, pp. 435f, 441.

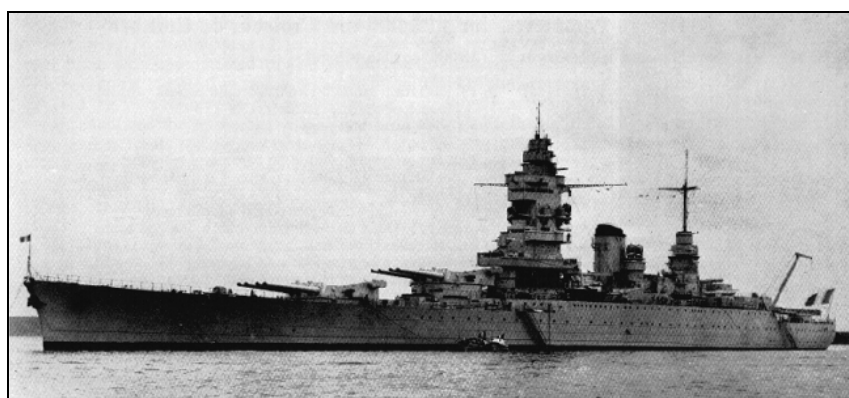
<sup>25</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altmark\\_\(Schiff\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altmark_(Schiff))

a minimum capability to support the three *Panzerschiffs* as well as the two SCHARNHORST class battlecruisers, if the latter were employed as raiders in spite of their limited range and problematic turbine engines.

### ***The French battlecruisers***

After the war the French had foreseen a requirement to meet the threat from powerful surface raiders. The initial worry was be such a use against the sea lines to North Africa across the western Mediterranean of the new heavy Italian cruisers of the TRENTO class that started construction in 1925. However, that concern was not strong enough to trigger a decision to restart the construction of capital ships to supplement and replace the French Navy's increasingly obsolete fleet of slow battleships.

The complacency ended only after Germany laid down their first *Panzerschiff* in winter 1929. The French Navy had no suitable answer. For that reason the new battlecruiser DUNKERQUE was ordered in the autumn of 1932 and the start of the sister ship STRASSBOURG followed in the summer of 1934. The former of the two entered service in the autumn of 1938 and latter in spring 1939. The three German vessels had been commissioned in 1933, 1934 and 1936 and were followed by the battlecruisers SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU especially constructed to be superior to the French ships rather than designed as long range raiders. These German battlecruisers were laid down in 1934 and 1936 and entered service at approximately the same time as the French units. They proved to have inferior sea going abilities.



The first French dedicated hunter, DUNKERQUE. ([www.ww2ships.com](http://www.ww2ships.com))

The two next and larger new French capital ships, the battleships RICHELIEU and JEAN BART, were built to match the new Italian ships of the LITTORIO class, but their construction triggered the start of BISMARCK and TIRPITZ in 1936, designed to be superior to the French ships. They were to be ready in the summer of 1940 and winter 1941 respectively.<sup>26</sup>

### ***The British response***

As already mentioned, the British had considered the threat during the last part of the Great War. During the period 1922-1932, support of slow convoys was exercised more than any other possible battleship employment. Admiral Sir Ernle Chatfield, the brilliant and dynamic First Sea Lord from 1933, used the threat from armoured raiders to counter the argument that bomber aircraft could replace the battleship. The British Empire depended on sea lines of communication that could not be properly protected by aircraft

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<sup>26</sup> John Jordan & Robert Dumas, *French Battleships 1922-1956*. Annapolis 2009

against capital ships. In 1932, before Chatfield took over, the Admiralty had warned the Foreign Office of the serious threat presented by the DEUTSCHLAND-class, proposing that the Germans should be allowed a U-boat force, if they stopped construction of the pocket-battleships. The summer 1935 exercise saw cruisers used in defence of a New York-bound convoy against a German raiding force that included DEUTSCHLAND-class vessels. In British-German negotiations about the implementation of their Naval Agreement, the Royal Navy negotiators tried to lure Raeder away from a further development of these *hybrid*, vessels towards the standard types defined in the Interwar naval arms limitation agreements, especially small battleships and light cruisers. British Naval intelligence was aware of the shift away from traditional fleet operations towards asymmetrical armoured raider operations in the German naval elite. The Admiralty saw it as a major challenge, also because it would compel the Royal Navy to disperse its heavy units to small escort or hunting forces thereby undermine its ability to assemble a sizable fleet to use against Japan from the new Singapore base.<sup>27</sup>

By late 1936 the threat from the armoured raiders and the need for British battleships had become generally acknowledged. Liddell Hart, who was normally critical of generals' and admirals' arguments, accepted that the Royal Navy would need battleships to counter that challenge. When capital ship vulnerability was investigated by an official committee, he supported the argument in *The Times* on 6 November of that year: "... that 'it would not be impossible for the capital ships of a hypothetical enemy, in the absence of a powerful British fleet, to place themselves, without interference, across our trade routes.' Here certainly is the strongest argument for the maintenance of capital ships."<sup>28</sup> However, even if the requirement was widely accepted, no new fast battleships would be available until the KING GEORGE V-class with the first unit laid down in winter 1937 would enter service. In that winter, the Royal Navy had come to consider German capital ships operating single or in groups in the Atlantic as one of its chief "*Strategical and Tactical Problems*."<sup>29</sup> However, until the new battleships were ready, the British would only have the three battlecruisers REPULSE, RENOWN (both commissioned 1916) and HOOD (entering service in 1920), with the necessary combination of superior fighting power and speed to counter the new German ships. In July 1938 the Admiralty decided to transfer the battlecruisers from the Mediterranean to the Home Fleet to have them ready for use against raiders from the end of the year.<sup>30</sup>

## ***A battleship beefed-up version of the concept for another war with Great Britain***

The work that started in August 1938 with the development of a new force goal for the Kriegsmarine aimed at a fast battleship force of eight, including the first limited range two: BISMARCK and TIRPITZ, and six of the more heavily armed, extremely long range *H-class*.<sup>31</sup> To SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU would be added three *O-class* battlecruisers<sup>32</sup> with a far more powerful artillery. The three *Panzerschiffs* would have their armament upgraded and be joined by a twelve *P Class cruisers* designed as dedicated raiders. They had

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<sup>27</sup> Joseph Moretz, *The Royal Navy and the Capital Ship in the Interwar Period. An Operational Perspective*. London 2002, pp. 162, 237 and note 212. Joseph A. Maiolo: *The Royal Navy and Nazi Germany, 1933-39. A Study in Appeasement and the Origins of the Second World War*. London 1998, p.7, chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>28</sup> Moretz, *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> Maiolo, p.80.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>31</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H\\_class\\_battleship\\_\(1939\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H_class_battleship_(1939))

<sup>32</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O\\_Class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Class)

longer range than the *Panzerschiffs*, were to be twice as big<sup>33</sup> and had two aircraft launch catapults where the first three only had one. At end of construction the German would have a pool of 15 long range raiders. The three heavy cruisers would be followed by two more. This *Z-Plan*-navy would also operate four aircraft carriers and 249 U-boats, including a hundred long range boats.<sup>34</sup>

In autumn 1938 Raeder wanted to give priority to the construction of the new raiders, but Hitler insisted that the six super-battleships came first.<sup>35</sup> The raider concept thus had to be developed to include these vessels. This meant that the older limited range, heavy ships would operate in the North Sea challenging the Royal Navy Home Fleet and deploying to protect German convoys breaking the blockade. The dedicated raiders plus the new large units of the *Z-Plan* would operate against the British trade routes in the Atlantic. The *H-class* super battleships (together with long range U-boats) that the Führer had given first priority in the construction sequence and were optimistically planned to become available in 1944. They were to form two to four raider task forces of one or more battleships each, a dedicated raider and at least one aircraft carrier.<sup>36</sup> In reality the Kriegsmarine had thereby formed modern, balanced, long range, super copies of Graf von Spee's East Asia Squadron of 1914. On one hand the construction plan thus clearly focused on creating an extremely robust trade warfare force with both surface and subsurface vessels. On the other hand, however, considering Great Britain's far greater dependence than Germany on protected, world-wide sea lines of communications that were also threatened by Italy and Japan, the completed *Z-Plan* fleet supported by tactical German land based air power would probably have created the German naval superiority over Britain in her home waters that Tirpitz never had achieved. The German navy would no longer have been the weaker one.



Fictional photo of the extremely long range *H-class* super battleship. The armament would include 8 x 40,6 cm guns for the first four units and 42 cm for the last to, the range at 19 knots was planned to be from 16000 to 20000 nautical miles (depending on sources). The ship would operate at least four search aircraft.  
(<http://media.photobucket.com/image/H-class%20battleship/skoblin/e2.jpg>)

The series of war-games conducted under Raeder's guidance later in that winter focused on how to breach the British North Sea barrier – the precondition for the deployment of the raider groups. Here it became

<sup>33</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kreuzer\\_P\\_Class](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kreuzer_P_Class)

<sup>34</sup> , [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plan\\_Z](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plan_Z)

<sup>35</sup> Döffler, Weimar, Hitler und die Marine, pp. 499, 526. Maiolo, p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> Die Marine des Deutschen Reiches 1919-1939 (see n 6), pp. 226-236, 245, 251, Maiolo, pp. 72, 160.

clear that the control of the Norwegian west coast should extend further north than previously considered necessary. Control over Denmark and Norway up to Bergen would only give “*tactical*” improvements. In order to have “*strategic*” implications – meaning giving the large surface vessels free access to the Atlantic – control had to go up to Trondheim to bypass the potential line of a new Northern Barrier.

### ***The first test of the concept: The DEUTSCHLAND and ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE raids***

GRAF SPEE departed for the South Atlantic on 21 August and DEUTSCHLAND for the North Atlantic three days later. The supply ship ALTMARK had deployed to support GRAF SPEE. Raeder wrote on 3 September that this was what could be done with the extremely limited forces available. The shorter range heavy ships had to keep the British battlecruisers occupied closer to home, thus indirectly safeguarding the raiders<sup>37</sup> in the way that he thought should have happened in an interaction between the High Seas Fleet and Graf von Spee’s squadron in late 1914. However, such an indirect effect depended on having forces in the North Sea strong enough to keep the opponent from dispatching ships to hunt the raiders, and even the significantly weakened Royal Navy found the necessary forces for that mission. Thereafter Raeder increasingly employed the armoured raiders independently of the home force efforts. During the following 1½ years they became the German Navy main effort.

The two raiders got authorisation to attack shipping on 26 September, when it had become clear that the war would continue after the defeat of Poland. DEUTSCHLAND found its first victim, a British steamer, on 6 October and shortly thereafter a Norwegian ship. On 9 October she boarded the American ship CITY OF FLINT and sent it with a prize crew towards Germany. However, as she entered Tromsø, the Norwegians interned the Germans and returned the ship to United States, thereby underlining one weakness of the concept: the dependence on neutral co-operation. DEUTSCHLAND returned to Kiel on 15 November, only to be renamed LÜTZOW on Hitler’s order, as the Führer could not accept the possibility of the loss of a ship called “Germany”.<sup>38</sup>

ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE had a relatively successful cruise in the South Atlantic that included a sally into the Indian Ocean, sinking nine ships. However, the vulnerability due to a still limited range was highlighted by the number of oiling rendezvous’ with ALTMARK: the first one took place on 1 September, and when the two ships met the last time on 6 December to fuel GRAF SPEE for the home journey, it was the ninth logistic meeting. GRAF SPEE’s captain decided to attack the shipping along the east coast of South America, a decision that led to the Battle of the Rive Plate on 13 December with a search group of one heavy and two light British cruisers. It was nearly exactly 25 years after Vice-Admiral Maximilian Graf von Spee had met his fate further south in the Battle of the Falklands, when he had delayed his return journey to achieve one last result. GRAF SPEE was damaged in the fight and needed repairs that could not be finished within the allowed 72 hours stay in neutral Montevideo, and she was therefore destroyed by her crew on 17 December, an act seen by Raeder as a humiliating end to the otherwise highly successful cruise.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p.251.

<sup>38</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutschland\\_\(1931\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deutschland_(1931))

<sup>39</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiral\\_Graf\\_Spee\\_\(Schiff\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Admiral_Graf_Spee_(Schiff))



The concept's dependence of control of the Norwegian coast was highlighted clearly on 16 February 1940, when the Royal Navy intercepted ALTMARK in a South Norwegian Fiord and liberated the crews taken from the victims of GRAF SPEE's cruise.<sup>40</sup>

The immediate Allied reaction to the German employment of the two raiding *Panzerschiffs* was to combine their response in a way roughly similar to what had been considered and planned by the British and Americans in the last months of World War 1. The Royal and French Navies formed search and hunting groups like the one that found GRAF SPEE off South America. DUNKERQUE and STRASBOURG that had been designed for this mission had been formed into a special *Force de Raid* right after their completion. They were now, however, normally used separately as the core of groups that could include Royal Navy vessels. One such force that was based on Dakar, designated *Force X*, included STRASBOURG, French cruisers and the small British carrier HMS HERMES. Late in October DUNKERQUE joined HMS HOOD in a search for the two German Battle Cruisers SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU that had sallied in support of the raiders.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Improving the geo-strategic conditions: "Weserübung"***

The battlecruiser raid was one element in the intensification of the war that made it possible for Raeder to make Hitler decide the operation against Norway in the winter and spring of 1940. Wolfgang Wegener had proposed in the analysis of German naval strategy in World War 1 published in 1929 that the best chance to beat the Grand Fleet in battle had been late 1914. Such a potentially decisive battle under the best possible conditions for the German would probably have taken place if an operation had then been launched against south-western Norway. The Royal Navy would have been forced to react and at that time the balance of forces was better than it would become later in the war. Taking control of Denmark and part of Norway would dramatically have extended the German Navy basis of operation in the North Sea and would have given it access to attacking the allied sea lines of communication. Where Wegener had been less than clear about how the follow-on operations should be conducted, the navy elite with Raeder had convinced itself that the best tools would be fast long range armoured cruisers.

When the war became reality five years before he would have the necessary fleet to realise his dream, Raeder seemed unable to identify ways to his objective beyond the already described deployment of DEUTSCHLAND and GRAF SPEE in a demonstration of the concept - and otherwise give first priority to the U-boat construction that he had only accepted half a year earlier. However, U-boat construction takes time, even if given the necessary increased share of scarce resources like best quality steel, and in early October the commanding admiral of the U-boat force, Karl Dönitz, underlined that if the very limited number of U-boats available during the first many months were to become effective, the force had to have access to forward bases to decrease the time deploying and returning.

During the following days the options were discussed among the admirals in Berlin and with the army Chief of General Staff. In line with previous analysis Trondheim was identified as a suitable location. Nobody, neither the admirals nor Hitler or the Army General Staff, thought that the coming offensive in the West would bring a decisive victory over France and access to the French Atlantic ports. On 10 October Hitler was briefed about the desirability to gain forward bases. The Führer was not convinced, however during the next

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<sup>40</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altmark\\_Incident](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altmark_Incident)

<sup>41</sup> French Battleships 1922-1956 (see n. 10), pp.68-69.

couple of months he became increasingly aware of the need to intensify economic warfare against Britain, the more radical means employed, the better.

On 21 October, before the return of DEUTSCHLAND and GRAF SPEE and to give indirect support to their efforts, Raeder launched SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU into the waters northeast of the British Isles in spite of the still immature condition of their machinery. Where the High Seas Fleet had only found empty sea on 23-24 April 1918, the two battle cruisers found and destroyed the British auxiliary cruiser HMS RAWALPINDI and returned to base without being intercepted. On 8 December 1939 Raeder underlined to Hitler that it was essential to interrupt British trade with Scandinavia. Northern Europe was quickly coming into the focus of the belligerents after the Soviet Union had launched the invasion of Finland on 30 November, and soon it became clear that the invasion would not become a walkover.

Three days later Raeder had his conversation in Berlin with the visiting Norwegian Nationalist Socialist leader, Vidkun Quisling, and the Grand Admiral realised that the visitor could be used to convince Hitler of the risk that the British could be invited and arrive in Norway early. Thereafter studies of an operation against Norway and Denmark were developed from the status it had achieved during 1917-18 into a plan that used the combined advantages of surprise and modern air power. The ALTMARK affair in mid-February underlined as mentioned the link between control of the Norwegian coast and successful cruiser warfare, and on 1 March Hitler could give his directive for the final stages of the attack preparation.

On 9 April the operation started, risking the remains of the surface navy that Raeder needed to realise his surface raider concept. He paid a high price: of his seven available large ships, one, the new heavy cruiser BLÜCHER, was lost, and the former *Panzerschiff* DEUTSCHLAND, now the heavy cruiser LÜTZOW, was seriously damaged by a torpedo hit. However, as the operation was meant to permanently change the geo-strategic framework of German naval possibilities, it could be considered a minor investment for a better future. Initially both another heavy cruiser and the first two powerful battleships were nearing completion, and the British were highly aware of the threat these ships presented. The construction on the first H-class ships had still not been cancelled.

Raeder had intended to send LÜTZOW on a South Atlantic raid at the same time as the operation against Norway, something that could weaken the British naval response, but Hitler had forced him to postpone the departure until after *Weserübung*. In the event the Führer's decision proved correct. The possibility that the major German units observed on 7-8 April were on the way to the Atlantic actually did lessen the Home Fleet focus on meeting the threat against Narvik.<sup>42</sup> The British let themselves be unbalanced by the mere option. The Royal Navy was so fascinated by the - in reality limited - risks related to another raider in the Atlantic and the possibility of a hopefully major surface engagement that Norway was nearly forgotten.

The risk that the surviving seven heavy German units would be joined by DUNKERQUE, STRASBOURG, RICHELIEU and modern French heavy cruisers led to Churchill's dramatic and painful decision in early July 1940 to order the attack on the formerly allied ships in Mers el-Kebir and Dakar. Together with *Weserübung*, the effects of that operation were probably the most dramatic influence the fast armoured raider concept had on history, both by further poisoning French public opinion in relation to its former British ally and by making clear to key American leaders that the British prime minister meant to fight on after Dunkirk.

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<sup>42</sup> Geirr H. Haarr, *The Invasion of Norway, April 1940*. Barnsley 2009, pp.73-74, 105.

## ***The concept employed under realistic conditions against Britain autumn 1940 to summer 1941***

The combination of control of the Norwegian and French Atlantic coasts and modern air power gave Raeder the secure access to the Atlantic trade routes that he had been looking for, however, the *Z-Plan* fleet of specialized large *H-class* battleships and *P-Class* very long range raiders was not available and he had to use all the remaining heavy units in line with his conviction, no matter their degree of suitability.

The most extended and successful raid was that of ADMIRAL SCHEER from 14 October 1940 to 1 April 1941 covering the North Atlantic, the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. The most significant effect of its cruise was the result of the sinking of the auxiliary cruiser JERVIS BAY that sacrificed itself on 5 November in the protection of the large convoy HX-84 out of Halifax. This near disaster forced the Royal Navy to employ single heavy ships in the protection of important convoys as the Americans had done in 1918. The two raids by ADMIRAL HIPPER in December 1940 and February 1941 were hampered by the limitation in range and the engine stability of the German heavy cruisers.<sup>43</sup> The next major and extended raid against the Atlantic routes, Operation "*Berlin*", was launched through the Denmark Strait with the last two available ships, SCHARNHORST and GNEISENAU, in early February 1941. The British had intelligence about the ship's departure, but had been awaiting the German force in the Iceland-Faeroe Gap. The two ships successfully attacked convoys in areas not covered by British air search and were only deterred when observing the now escorting battleship. The two ships reached the French port Brest on 22 March. They used the fact that the control of both the Norwegian and French coastlines had given Germany a basis for naval operations against the Atlantic sea routes far beyond the dreams of the German naval elite including both Wegener and Raeder. After the successful return to home waters in February 1942, GNEISENAU was damaged beyond repair in dock by repeated serious bomb damage; however SCHARNHORST was deployed to Norway for attacks against the Allied convoys to Russia.<sup>44</sup>

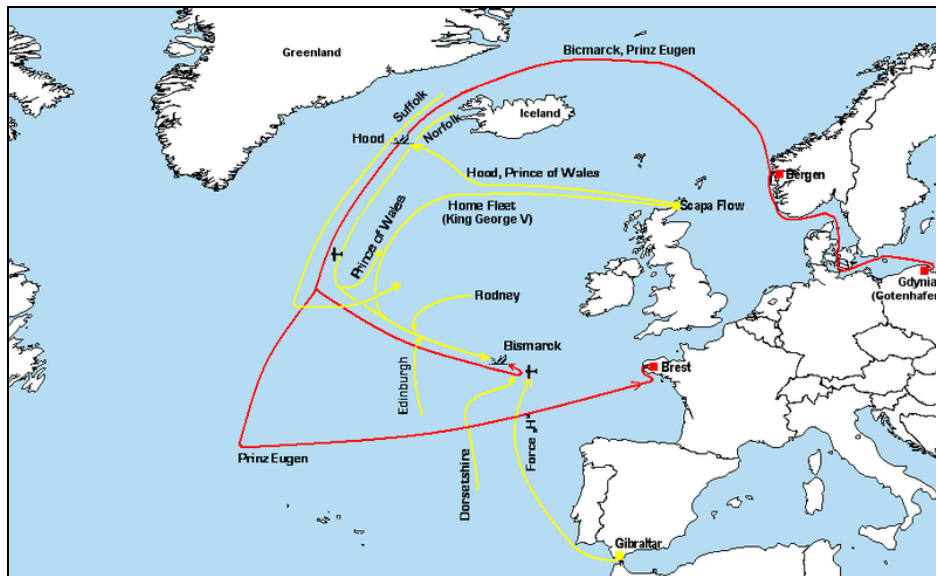
The next major raid followed the conclusion of the large ship construction programme. When BISMARCK and the heavy cruiser PRINZ EUGEN left Gothenhafen, the former Polish naval base of Gdynia, for operation "*Rheinübung*", a well prepared three months long raid on the North Atlantic trade routes, on 18 May 1941, both battleships of the class had been commissioned and all the heavy cruisers of the ADMIRAL HIPPER class that would be completed were available. Raeder informed Hitler about the raid on 21 May, however it was not discussed in the Führer conference with the naval leadership the next day.

During the spring of 1941 the British had become increasingly pressed in meeting the intensifying U-boat offensive against the Atlantic convoys, and the BISMARCK raid could be seen as a threat against the whole convoy system. Luck meant that the two ships were sighted by a reconnaissance flight when fuelling in a fiord close to Bergen, making it possible for the Home Fleet to intensify patrolling and dispatch two fast capital ships, HMS HOOD and HMS PRINCE OF WALES, to interdict the German force in the Denmark Strait. The old British battlecruiser was destroyed and the completely new battleship was forced to disengage with serious damage from the heavy and very accurate German gunnery, not, however, without damaging BISMARCK enough to force it to interrupt the raid and proceed towards a French port.

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<sup>43</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_pocket\\_battleship\\_Admiral\\_Scheer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_pocket_battleship_Admiral_Scheer), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_cruiser\\_Admiral\\_Hipper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_cruiser_Admiral_Hipper), and James P. Levy, *The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II*, Basingstoke 2003, pp.77-79.

<sup>44</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_battleship\\_Scharnhorst](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_battleship_Scharnhorst), [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gneisenau\\_\(1936\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gneisenau_(1936)) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation\\_Berlin\\_\(Atlantic\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Berlin_(Atlantic))



Operation "Rheinübung". (en.wikipedia.org)

Thereafter all available British naval and RAF Coastal Command forces available were deployed to find and destroy the German ship. For some time the Royal Navy maintained contact and deployed its obsolete carrier torpedo bombers, succeeding in achieving one hit, however without seriously damaging the toughly constructed battleship. Thereafter the British lost contact and only rediscovered the damaged battleship by a Royal Air Force Coastal Command flight's fortunate observation of the oil slick from the damage created by the PRINCE OF WALES shell. Additional carrier torpedo bomber attacks late 26 May succeeded in disabling BISMARCK, and in order to avoid capture, the crew shuttled her the following morning, after incessant air attacks and heavy shelling had failed to sink the hull. PRINZ EUGEN had been released in time to reach Brest safely. In the 6 June conference with Raeder, Hitler's question why BISMARCK had not returned after sinking HOOD made clear that his interest in the raiding concept was rather superficial.<sup>45</sup>

The events had demonstrated to the British how difficult it would be to deal with raids by the sister ship, the equally tough and powerful TIRPITZ. To the Hitler and critical German leaders, however, the loss of one of the two powerful battleships in its first and only operation in the Atlantic highlighted the weaknesses and risks of the concept of independent surface raiders, especially if they were employed beyond the support range of German land based air power. That limitation meant that a key Allied convoy route should be found within that range. This requirement, however, the Germans fulfilled within a month of the loss of BISMARCK by the invasion the Soviet Union. Thereafter all German war efforts against Great Britain including the operations of the navy became reduced to being of secondary importance.

Even if the Kriegsmarine had wanted to continue the Atlantic raids in spite of Germany's necessary focus on fighting the new, massive, continental enemy, it would no longer have been logistically realistic. During 1941 six of the eight supply ships were sunk.<sup>46</sup> The effect of the remaining large German combatants was in

<sup>45</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_battleship\\_Bismarck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_battleship_Bismarck). Plus Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945. Ed. By Jak P. Mallmann Showell, London 2005, pp. 196-218.

<sup>46</sup> The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II (see n. 25), p.107.

reality reduced to become a *fleet-in-being* hiding in the Norwegian fiords, locally important due to the significance of the convoys to Russia. However, as in the previous war the whole idea of being limited to constructive operational posturing seemed unacceptable to the German martial ego, even when the method brought dramatic results.

### ***The Convoy PQ 17 disaster***

The risk of a well planned large surface ship raid centred within the cover of land based air power was exactly what threatened the large and valuable - 34 vessel - Arkhangelsk bound convoy on 4 July 1942. The Allies had intelligence that TIRPITZ supported by ADMIRAL SCHEER and ADMIRAL HIPPER were placed and ready to attack the convoy. It made the Admiralty order PQ 17 to scatter and continue with ships dispersed to their destination, limiting the vulnerability to surface ship attack.

The protection of the convoy and reaction mirrored the methods that the Royal Navy had developed after the 17 October and 12 December 1917 attacks on Scandinavian Convoys: A close escort of destroyers, here six, and other escort vessels (a total of 13), an immediate covering force made up of a cruiser squadron of four heavy cruisers and four destroyers, here combined Royal Navy and U.S. Navy, and a similarly combined heavy back-up force of a British aircraft carrier, two battleships, a heavy and a light cruiser and nine destroyers.



The Convoy PQ 17 disaster. (en.wikipedia.org)

The threat from the German surface force never materialised, but the dispersal order broke the cohesion and effect of the convoy protection by the close escort and made the individual ships easy targets for the

waiting U-boats and raids by Luftwaffe bombers from their air bases in North Norway. Only 11 merchant ships made it to the destination, 21 of those lost were sunk after the order to scatter.<sup>47</sup>

The event demonstrated what could be achieved by the combination of a surface raider threat with a high concentration of U-boats within the effective reach of air power, something fundamentally different from the independent, armoured raider.

### ***The final end of the concept and of Raeder***

Even if SCHARNHORST was lost on 26 December 1943 to the guns of HMS DUKE OF YORK during an attack on an Arctic convoy, and even if TIRPITZ survived until late November 1944, the idea and prospect of fast, armoured raiding against trade route died on the last day of 1942, as the result of the humiliating outcome of the Battle in the Barents Sea. The contracts for Raeder's navy's hope for the future, the H-class battleships, had been cancelled several months earlier. In Operation "*Regenbogen*" LÜTZOW and ADMIRAL HIPPER with a force of six destroyers were launched against the 14 ship sub-convoy JW-51B that had a close escort of five destroyers and five other escorts and a supporting force of two large light cruisers. Very aggressive handling of the British destroyers and early entry into the fight of the two cruisers enabled all the merchant ships to continue to their destinations in Russian ports. The British lost a destroyer and a minesweeper, the Germans a destroyer, however they broke off the raid fearing that the British cruisers would be followed by a battleship force, a rather logical expectation considering the normal British practice.<sup>48</sup>

For Hitler, the humiliating defeat by a far inferior forces made him certain of what he had come to feel during the war and thereafter increasingly expressed: that the large naval units were a useless waste of resources as they tied-up both light naval forces and scarce air force units in their protection no matter if they were at sea or in harbour. In *Mein Kampf* he had criticised Tirpitz for his ship building strategy that "*by its form had given up the attack and thus had been forced to remain on the defensive. By that choice it had renounced the possibility to seek a decisive result, as that could and would – forever – rest with the attack*"<sup>49</sup>. Now Raeder's big ships had proven themselves to be unable to deliver heroic results, even when they were superior in combat power ... in Hitler's unreflecting opinion: disgusting.

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<sup>47</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convoy\\_PQ\\_17](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Convoy_PQ_17), Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945 (see n. 23), pp. 284-288, and The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II (see n. 25), pp.119-125.

<sup>48</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlacht\\_in\\_der\\_Barentssee](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlacht_in_der_Barentssee), Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945 (see n. 23), pp.302-306, and The Royal Navy's Home Fleet in World War II (see n. 25), pp.128-133.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Die Marine des Deutschen Reiches 1919-1939 (see n 6), p. 145



“Panzerschiff” LÜTZOW former DEUTSCHLAND, the German navy’s first investment in the idea that contributed to Raeder’s downfall. Here on 13 April 1940 with serious damage after being hit by British torpedo in Operation Weserübung, because Hitler vetoed Raeder’s South Atlantic raid. (en.wikipedia.org)

On 6 January 1943 he ordered Raeder to make a plan for the deactivation of the large surface units, starting with the damaged GNEISENAU. Raeder complied on the 15 January, but on 30 January he resigned his command and the U-boat commander, Karl Dönitz, was appointed as his successor.<sup>50</sup> The German Navy’s active, less humiliating - alternative to a passive “Fleet-in-being - way to employ the weaker fleet Raeder was left with by the too early war had proven to be a mirage.

### ***Concluding observations***

The concept of the long-range, fast, armoured raider must be considered a risky fallacy by the interwar German navy elite including Raeder. It represented the romantic dream of the big surface ship professionals of the *Reichmarine*, who did not want to embrace a *Young School* cruiser warfare structure with a main emphasis on U-boats until it was too late to do anything else. The concept could not become effective as an independent - main - naval strategic approach.

Initially, in World War I, the concept was unrealistic because of the limited range of the large German surface vessels, and when the range improved with use of oil and improved propulsion of different types, the development of aviation, especially carrier aviation, and thereafter radar, had improved the hunters’ possibilities against the raiders dramatically. The conditions of the fast frigate raider in the time of sail were not to return for surface craft.

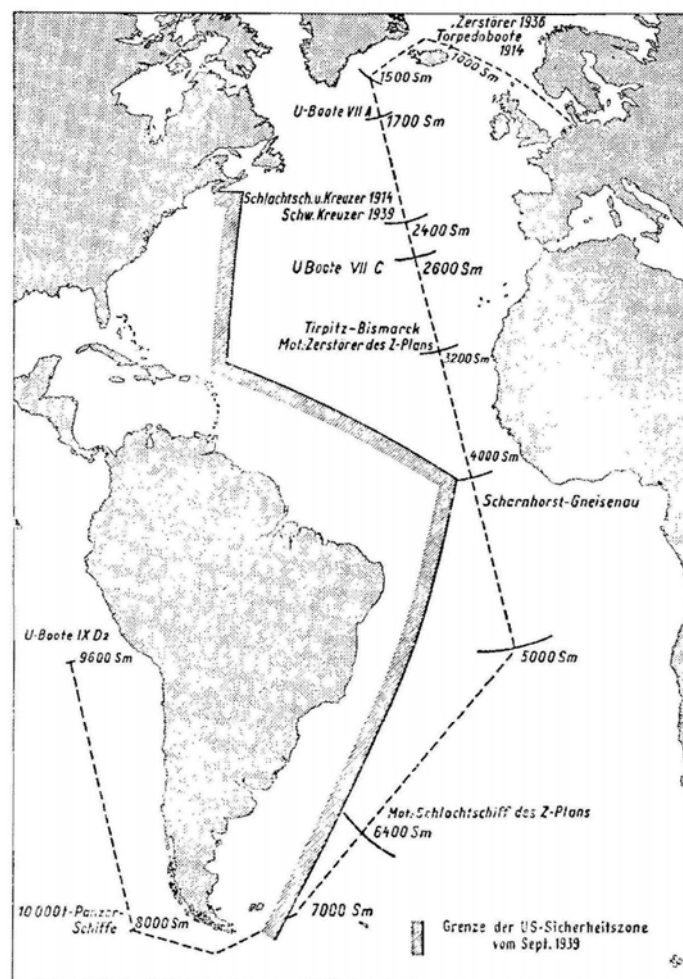
The areas of the open sea where the large raiders could hide disappeared quickly with the increasing number and range of maritime patrol aircraft equipped with ever improving radars. When found and followed, the destruction thereafter became ensured by the quickly improving capabilities of carrier bombers. The large, independent raider or handful of raiders could not compete in staying power, stealth

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Salewski, *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935-1945. Band II: 1942-1945.* Frankfurt a. M. 1945. Plus Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945 (see n.23). London 2005, pp. 306-308.

and sea lines covered with the number of U-boat “wolf packs” that could be built and manned using an equivalent amount of resources. They could only become a meaningful, serious threat if combined with submarines and especially if also linked to employment of air power.

However, the *Reichsmarine’s* choice in the mid 1920s developed into a serious de facto threat in 1940-41 due to the lack of modern capital ships in the Royal Navy at the start of the war. The British were without fast, robust battleships and the existing aircraft carriers were without effective air groups. Ever since the Great War the Royal Navy had perceived the armoured raider to be a far more serious threat against the Atlantic sea lines than a renewed U-boat campaign, even this was contrary to both logic and de facto experience. Even the threat of a raid could create disaster as happened with the PQ 17 convoy.



Aktionsradius einiger deutscher Schiffstypen  
(Hin- und Rückfahrt abzüglich 20% Gefechtsreserve)

The range of the German raiders. (Friedrich Ruge, *Der Seekrieg 1939-1945* (3<sup>rd</sup> Enlarged Edition), Stuttgart 1962, p.21)

It added to the weakness of the concept that while Raeder would accept the sacrifice of one of his remaining large ships on the altar of the Navy’s future, Hitler could only accept its loss if it happened in a way that brought politically useful gains in both results and demonstrated superior German aggressiveness and heroism in a dramatic way in a battle ship against ship. Even a significant result against trade like that of the ADMIRAL GRAF SPEE could not balance the loss of political prestige that would be the result of the destruction of one of the major vessels in a rather unglamorous way. The political cost of loss was



highlighted when Hitler ordered some reduction in the potential loss of prestige by renaming DEUTSCHLAND to LÜTZOW. To write off even ten of the mass produced U-boats in a month no matter the circumstances was routine attrition of war. To lose the high profile symbols of German power had been unacceptable for the Kaiser, and without heroic sacrifice or decisive results a loss was intolerable for Hitler. His understanding of naval operations was limited to the decisive battle of heavy artillery ships, and any other role made him see these units as useless, as he had always suspected that the small "*Schiffchen*" of the DEUTSCHLAND class would be. They were only useful for training.<sup>51</sup>

The last open question is what would have happened if the war had been delayed until winter 1945. We assume that the serious bottlenecks of yards, skilled labour and steel supply had been removed. Then Raeder would either have the larger number of dedicated raiders that the navy wanted or the *H-class* battleships that Hitler actually decided to build. In either case the German Navy would have around a dozen long range armoured vessels available for Atlantic operations that would be grouped with a couple of carriers to form a handful of raiding task groups.

There is no doubt that the combined pressure from 160 long range U-boats and the raiding groups would be critical. However, even if the power of the German forces had increased, their basic handicap in relation to the Allies would not have disappeared: the lack of bases for logistic and air support. Vice-Admiral Kurt Assmann was probably correct when he noted that the failure to use the chance offered by the French defeat in summer 1940 to get access to overseas bases meant that the war was lost.<sup>52</sup>

The groups' larger size and the carrier air activities reduced their ability to rely on stealth and increased dependence on a vulnerable logistic tail back to Germany. The accelerated construction would not have been hidden to Britain and France, and even if the aim of trade warfare might have remained partly obscured, accelerated balancing construction would have taken place, even beyond the completion of the LION and RICHELIEU classes of battleships and the planned MAJESTIC CLASS aircraft carriers, and the fast development of radar technology and long range maritime patrol aviation would have enhanced hunting operations. The outcome of the struggle at sea would, however, probably be decided by U.S. decisions as was the case in the actual war.

This small story of the effects of a fascinating, but fundamentally anachronistic, idea might be employed to demonstrate the benefits of the critical reading of military history. It is just one more example of how self-reinforcing group-think in a service elite undermines the ability of military professional analysis when not exposed directly to the audit of war. Simple solutions at operational or even tactical-technical level to strategic problems are as risky as they are tempting – as is cocaine use to fast car drivers.

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<sup>51</sup> Döffler, Weimar, Hitler und die Marine, pp. 209, 215, 217, 224.

<sup>52</sup> From Treue's introduction in: Deutsche Marinerüstung 1919-1942, p. 29.