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Fleet-in-Being: *Tirpitz* and the Battle for the Arctic Convoys

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The history of the German battle fleet in World War II is largely one of struggle against hopeless odds, punctuated by brief but dramatic clashes as far afield as the South Atlantic and high Arctic. Yet despite its modest size in relation to its main adversary, the Royal Navy, the German battle fleet occupied a central, almost mythical place in the minds of British planners, who for much of the war saw the individual capital ships of the Kriegsmarine as potent threats to their maritime dominance. The most important role Adolf Hitler's capital ships performed was as a "fleet-in-being," where by their presence astride the Allies' vital seaborne trade routes they represented a significant threat.

Of all the Kriegsmarine's capital ships, none had a more palpable effect on British maritime strategy than the battleship *Tirpitz*. As the second and last unit of the *Bismarck* class, she was arguably the most powerful warship built in Europe before or since. However, her wartime career as her own fleet-in-being was neither very eventful nor very glamorous—especially when compared to the epic drama of the *Bismarck*, her famous sister, which has been immortalized in numerous books and a feature-length film. However, *Tirpitz* was—if more subtly so—by far the more effective ship, although she never fired her guns in anger at an Allied counterpart.[1]

Tirpitz, her mundane life notwithstanding, not only contributed indirectly to major Allied shipping losses, but the threat she posed while lurking in Norway's fjords tied down significant Allied naval forces in northern Europe. This was at a time when Allied warships were hard pressed in other theatres. She also forced the British, who became obsessed with her destruction, to commit resources out of all proportion to her value in repeated attempts to sink her. These operations were costly both in terms of men and materiel and achieved little lasting success until 1943–1944. By then, the Allies had for all intents and purposes won the naval conflict in Europe, and *Tirpitz* had ceased to be a significant player in the war.

As the Chief of the Italian General Staff, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, once remarked, "The conception of a naval battle as an end in itself is absurd."[2] Echoing similar sentiments, Britain's First Sea Lord, Admiral Dudley Pound, asserted in 1942 that "It is only the politicians who imagine that ships are not earning their keep unless they are madly rushing about the ocean."[3] While perhaps

unglamorous, the policy of weaker naval powers throughout history has often been to further their strategic goals by keeping their fleets intact, avoiding risking them against the enemy unless absolutely necessary. The fleet-in-being strategy—a term coined around 1690 during the War of the League of Augsburg—is an appealing option for naval powers that have little to gain and much to lose by risking their few precious capital ships in tests of strength against superior enemy forces. By keeping its fleet "in-being," a weaker naval power risks little while possibly gaining much—forcing the enemy to react in accordance with its wishes, to a greater extent than if its fleet was squandered in costly naval engagements.[4]

Figure 1. *"The Lone Queen of the North."* Lurking in Norway's picturesque fjords, Tirpitz posed a grave menace to the Allied Arctic convoys. This is how the ship appeared during Operation Rösselsprung; she is seen here in Altafjord sometime after the abortive sortie. (http://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-71000/NH-71390.html)

Tirpitz was commissioned into a fleet that had been thrown into war prematurely with no hope of defeating the Royal Navy in open battle. When Hitler plunged the Third Reich into world war in September 1939, the Kriegsmarine was largely unprepared for a naval conflict. This lamentable situation (from a German standpoint) was very different from that which had faced the Kaiserliche Marine and the Imperial German Navy at the beginning of the Great War twenty-five years prior. In 1914 the German Navy was the second largest in the world behind the Royal Navy. Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the one responsible for sparking a battleship arms race with the British, had in fact contributed to driving that nation

into the Allied camp.[5]

However, the Allied defeat of Germany in 1918 saw draconian measures implemented in order to prevent its maritime resurgence. Besides being the catalyst for the German fleet's defiant scuttling at Scapa Flow in 1919, these measures largely succeeded in stymieing the Weimar Republic's technical and organizational means to rebuild the navy in the interwar years. By the time Hitler came to power and renounced the Versailles Treaty (brokering a naval deal with appeasement-minded Britain in the process), the Germans were hopelessly far behind their future adversaries in naval construction.[6]

Despite the tremendous hurdles faced by Hitler's Kriegsmarine during the rearmament period in the 1930s, its commander-in-chief, Grand-Admiral Erich Raeder, was determined to see the grandeur of the Kaiserliche Marine restored. It is reasonable to believe that Hitler himself (though largely devoid of naval competence) also craved, at least initially, the great-power status and political leverage of the traditional battle fleet. It was a fantastically ambitious program by any standard. Buoyed by Hitler's guarantees that there would be no war with Britain before 1944, Raeder envisioned a powerful fleet of battleships (after the *Bismarck*s would have followed the H-class, displacing over 56,300 metric tons), aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and submarines able to sweep the British from the North Sea by 1948. This is an important consideration and helps explode the myth that Hitler never really wanted to fight the British Empire or the West. Such a construction program could only have been geared in the long-term toward confronting the Anglo-American naval power bloc.[7]

As it was, Germany's extravagant "Z-plan" was rendered stillborn by the onset of hostilities in 1939. In retrospect, the German decision to reconstruct a battle fleet may have been folly; even if the necessary steel and manpower had been acquired for its ships, the question of where the fuel for operating such a navy would have come from is not clear. Indeed, Germany had enough trouble scrounging fuel for the few capital ships it did possess during World War II. The German war effort would probably have been better served by a stronger focus from the outset on U-boat production over surface ship building—in other words, on sea-denial versus sea-control weapons. Instead, the outbreak of World War II presented the German Navy with the worst of two worlds: an embryonic battle fleet and a U-boat arm that had been neglected in favor of the former until it was too late.[8]

Given the situation faced by the Kriegsmarine surface fleet at the outset of World War II, there were only two strategies for which Raeder's capital ships could be realistically employed: fleet-in-being and *guerre de course* (commerce raiding).

Raeder, being a proponent of the latter, envisioned his heavy units as solitary raiders prowling the sea lanes, using the vast expanse of the open ocean to evade Allied pursuers. For this kind of mission, his new cruisers and battleships were well suited; they were blessed with good range and high speed, able to outrun anything they could not outgun, and possessed ample facilities for reconnaissance float planes. Raeder was keenly aware of the tremendous disruptive potential these vessels could have on enemy shipping and naval movements, as Germany's enemies fumbled around the ocean trying to catch the elusive ships.[9]

While ultimately a failure, Raeder's commerce raiding doctrine with heavy units paid dividends early in the war. The 1940–1941 sorties of battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* were particularly disruptive to Allied shipping. However, deeply distressed by the loss of *Bismarck* during her maiden sortie in May 1941, Hitler prohibited his capital ships from commerce raiding in the Atlantic. Instead, he ordered the Kriegsmarine surface ships rebased to occupied Norway. This was primarily to secure the Reich's northern flank against a potential Allied invasion, which the Führer feared and with which he was obsessed for most of the war. By keeping the surface ships in Norway they would not only serve as an effective fleet-in-being and deter invasion, but also be able to strike out against the Allied Lend-Lease convoys to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk in the Soviet Union, which had begun running the Arctic gauntlet soon after the Germans launched Operation *Barbarossa* in June 1941.[10]

In any case, the Kriegsmarine's use of capital ships as commerce raiders in the Atlantic was a dubious proposition by the end of 1942, as by then Allied detection measures and air surveillance had effectively closed the high seas to German surface warships. However, the Allies' Arctic supply route to the USSR was dreadfully vulnerable and could be interdicted far more easily, close as it lay to the Nazi-occupied Norwegian coast. Here, the Kriegsmarine's surface ships were always near safe harbors and could count on air support for their sorties. This, then, was the strategic situation that greeted *Tirpitz* on 10 January 1942, as she concluded her sea trials in the Baltic and was declared fully operational with Captain Karl Topp in command. Five days later, *Tirpitz* departed Wilhelmshaven for Norway.[11]

The *Bismarck* class battleships, of which *Tirpitz* with her standard displacement of 42,344 metric tons was the second and last, have gone down in popular lore as super ships of immense power. This, however, is not entirely accurate. Though *Tirpitz* was in many respects an excellent design and without doubt a formidable warship, she possessed few clear-cut advantages over contemporary battleship designs. On the one hand, she was well suited for

commerce raiding. She possessed long range with an operational radius of nearly 9,000 nautical miles at 17 knots, and with her 30-knot top speed was very fast for her size. She was seaworthy (an issue plaguing Germany's earlier battleship designs), extremely well constructed with good watertight subdivision, and very difficult to sink, as illustrated by her sister ship's ability to withstand dreadful punishment in May 1941 (although she was in the end sunk, either through scuttling or from British torpedoes).[12]

Tirpitz, like other German warships, also possessed excellent optical equipment and fire directors; the accuracy and rate of fire of the battleship's guns in good visibility was excellent. Her main armament, comprising eight 38-cm (15-in.) guns in four dual turrets, though far from the heaviest broadside then afloat, was in keeping with the standards of the period. She was certainly capable of matching any single Allied battleship before 1943, let alone the cruisers that were often assigned to escort Arctic convoys. Overall, the *Bismarck* class compared favorably with the battleship designs of other nations during the same period. Like *Tirpitz*, none of these vessels were without their strengths and weaknesses. The Japanese *Yamato* from the same period was, by virtue of her gargantuan size (65,000 metric tons standard displacement) in a class all her own, while the later American *Iowa* class fast battleships predictably outclassed *Tirpitz*. But this should come as no surprise; the first of the *Iowas* was not launched until 1942. Thus no genuine conclusions can be drawn by comparing these next-generation ships to their predecessors, all laid down before World War II.[13]

Despite her many strengths, *Tirpitz* did suffer from certain design flaws. Above all was the fact that Germany had been forbidden to build and thus experiment with and develop their warship technology sufficiently during the interwar period. As such, the *Bismarck* class, though modern looking, betrayed a conservative design with its share of drawbacks. The armor scheme was old-fashioned; far too much of the ships' sensitive electrical and hydraulic lines lay exposed above the horizontal armored deck, which was situated lower in the hull than was the case in other navies' battleships. By situating their main armored decks higher and thus keeping these vital parts within the ship's protective scheme, other nations avoided this problem.[14]

Lastly, the fact that *Tirpitz's* sister ship *Bismarck* could be successfully attacked by a handful of obsolete carrier biplanes (whose torpedoes jammed her rudder and enabled the British to intercept and sink her) is also telling. However, in this respect the German battleships were no worse than the rest of their Axis (and many Allied) contemporaries, none of which matched the potent antiaircraft armament of many late-war American battleships. *Tirpitz*, during her sojourn in

Norway, was increasingly up-gunned with single and quadruple 20-mm antiaircraft mounts, but by and large she remained until the end of her days, like most battleships, vulnerable to air attack.[15]

However, it is important to remember that any advantages or disadvantages *Tirpitz* may have possessed as a fighting ship were rendered largely academic by the increasing superiority of Allied radar technology. By 1943, the ability to locate, track, and train their capital ships' weapons by radar gave the Allies an enormous advantage in any gun duel, especially in the perpetual darkness and inclement weather of the Arctic winter. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fate of the German battleship *Scharnhorst* off the North Cape in December 1943. Lured out to sea by a British ruse, *Scharnhorst* made for convoy JW-55B only to come under fire from enemy warships in a carefully laid trap. *Scharnhorst*, considered by her crew the luckiest ship in the Kriegsmarine, fumbled blindly around in the Polar darkness while she was ambushed repeatedly by accurate British radar directed gunnery. Her superior speed almost enabled her to escape back to Norway, until a parting shell from the battleship *Duke of York* crippled her propulsion and enabled the British to close. Overwhelmed, the gallant but doomed *Scharnhorst* eventually slipped beneath the icy waves with all but thirty-six of her crew. *Tirpitz's* radar equipment, though good by early-war standards, was by 1943 outclassed by the rapid pace of Allied electronic development—particularly the ability to integrate radar and fire control.[16]

The battleship *Tirpitz,* named after Grand-Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, father of the German Navy, was launched on (a perhaps inauspicious) April Fools' Day in 1939. Commissioned 25 February 1941, the ship will forever be associated with Nazi-occupied Norway and the Arctic convoy battles. Upon completion of sea trials in January 1942, she was allocated to Norway as the centerpiece in Hitler's defense of Fortress Europe's northern flank. From the outset, the intention was to utilize the battleship actively against the Allied convoys to the Soviet Union. The battleship's two major forays against the Arctic convoys would, however, prove abortive, although *Tirpitz's* presence in the area indirectly led to the annihilation of convoy PQ-17.[17]

Tirpitz's first sortie into the Arctic Ocean has in post-war sources been called Operation *Sportpalast*. The operation's actual name, insofar as it was given one, was *Nordmeer*, coined by its commander Admiral Otto Ciliax. *Nordmeer* took place between 6 and 13 March 1942; the target was convoy PQ-12, bound for Murmansk. Accompanying *Tirpitz* was a small escort composed of destroyers *Z25, Friedrich Ihn,* and *Herrmann Schoemann*. Having left Kiel in Germany for her new base in Fættenfjord, near the city of Trondheim in central Norway, only

two months prior, her crew and their Commanding Officer, Captain Topp, were fresh and keen on getting to grips with the enemy. PQ-12 was only lightly defended against surface attack, and against a monster like *Tirpitz* was extremely vulnerable.[18]

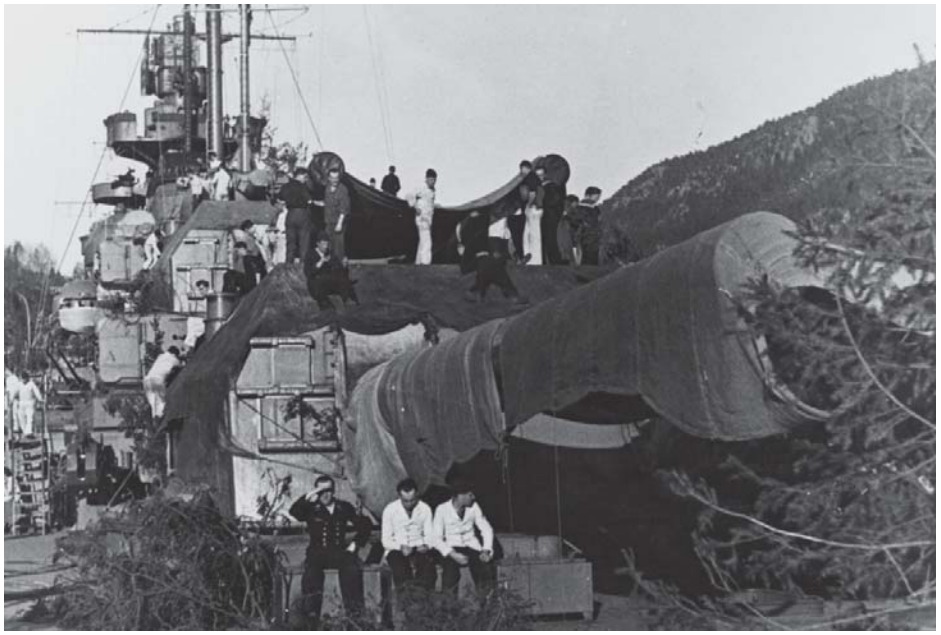

Figure 2. A heavily camouflaged Tirpitz nestled in the narrow Fættenfjord, sometime in 1942. While drills and other activities kept the crew fairly busy, they must have chafed under the ship's long periods of inactivity. (http://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-71000/NH-71395.html)

Also at sea during this time was convoy QP-8; this one on its way back from Murmansk and equally vulnerable. However, the appalling weather of the Arctic winter frustrated German attempts to engage either PQ-12 or QP-8. To make matters worse, elements of the British Home Fleet under Admiral John Tovey, the man who had hunted *Bismarck* in May 1941, were also in the area providing indirect cover for the convoys. Tovey's force, comprising battleships *King George V* and *Duke of York*, the battlecruiser *Renown*, the aircraft carrier *Victorious*, one cruiser and 12 destroyers, was certainly capable of dealing with *Tirpitz* and her tiny escort, though this was dependent on the British admiral's ability to detect and attack the German vessels before they could destroy a convoy and escape back to Norway.[19]

After futilely groping around in darkness and blinding snowstorms, Ciliax

reluctantly aborted the operation and returned to Norway. During her return voyage, *Tirpitz* was given her baptism of fire (not the one for which her crew had hoped) when twelve Albacore torpedo bombers from Tovey's force pounced. These were the successors of the old Swordfish biplanes that had attacked her sister the year before. The Albacores failed to score any hits on the wildly maneuvering battleship, and lost two aircraft in the process. Temporarily putting into Bogen Bay near the iron ore port of Narvik on 9 March, on 12 March *Tirpitz* left Bogen, returning to her base in Fættenfjord the next day. Ciliax could not have known it at the time, but his flagship had come within 54 nautical miles of PQ-12 and as little as 11 nautical miles of QP-8. Thankfully for the Allies, darkness and appalling weather saved the convoys from detection and probable annihilation.[20]

Tirpitz remained in Fættenfjord until her next sortie against the Soviet convoys in July. As the darkness of the Polar winter gave way to the continuous daylight of summer, PQ-17 began assembling in Hvalfjord, Iceland. The Home Fleet under Admiral Tovey would again provide distant cover, in the shape of *Duke of York* and *Victorious*, joined this time by the American battleship *Washington*, two cruisers, and 14 destroyers. The timing of the convoy was critical; on the Eastern Front, the Wehrmacht had begun its *Fall Blau* offensive and had pushed deep into southern Russia, driving the Red Army before it toward the city of Stalingrad on the river Volga. The Soviets were desperate for any and all aid the Lend-Lease program could provide. As for the British, they were about to have the latent power of *Tirpitz* as a fleet-in-being hammered home in the most ruthless fashion.[21]

The German operation against PQ-17 was codenamed *Rösselsprung*, and involved a noticeably larger contingent than that which had tried to intercept PQ-12 in March. It was in fact one of the largest sorties of German warships undertaken during the war. *Tirpitz* was the centerpiece of the German raiding force, and her group included the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*, the destroyers *Karl Galster, Theodor Riedel, Friedrich Ihn,* and *Hans Lody*, and two torpedo boats. A second force composed of the pocket-battleships *Lützow* and *Admiral Scheer,* plus another six destroyers supported *Tirpitz*'s group. *Tirpitz*'s group would sortie from Trondheim while *Lützow*'s group would sail from Narvik. The plan was to rendezvous in Altafjord in northern Norway, then strike out together against the convoy. Admiral Otto Schniewind, Admiral Ciliax's replacement, exercised direct overall command of the operation from the Kriegsmarine flagship, while Vice-Admiral Oskar Kummetz commanded the pocket-battleship group. The surface fleet's operational area would be east of Bear Island in the

Barents Sea, where interference from Tovey's covering force was less likely. Any attack on the convoy west of this meridian was to be conducted by U-boats and aircraft only.[22]

From the beginning, several factors severely limited the German surface fleet's freedom of movement. Hitler insisted that first the Germans attack and neutralize any enemy carrier detected in the area. This dramatically curtailed Admiral Schniewind's freedom of action. The second was the expert navigation required along Norway's shoal-strewn coast; the operation got off to an inauspicious start when *Lützow* ran aground in thick fog, as did three of the four destroyers that sailed with the *Tirpitz* group. Lastly, a shortage of fuel oil limited the German fleet's speed and operational radius.[23]

The German surface force, minus the four grounded ships, finally sortied with Hitler's blessing from Altafjord against PQ-17 on 5 July 1942, two days after assembling. However, by then the force had already accomplished more than it could reasonably have hoped for, as before the Germans sortied—and to their stunned disbelief—PQ-17 scattered. Responsibility for this momentous decision lay at the feet of Britain's First Sea Lord, the ailing Admiral Dudley Pound. It had been brought about by the belief that *Tirpitz* and her consorts had already sailed and were bearing down on the convoy. The order to scatter was essentially an act of desperation; the logic was that individual ships, running for their lives, would have a statistically higher chance of reaching port.[24]

As it was, not only were the German warships still swaying placidly at anchor in Altafjord when Admiral Pound made his tragic judgment, but the German surface fleet never got anywhere near the convoy. After rounding the North Cape and steaming east to his operational area, Schniewind began to receive updates of the convoy's dispersal and the U-boat and bomber attacks being conducted against it. As *Tirpitz* was primarily there to neutralize the convoy escorts so the smaller vessels could engage the merchantmen, Grand-Admiral Raeder no longer saw any need to risk his prestige warship with the enemy convoy scattered and at the mercy of the U-boats and Luftwaffe. The disappointment was palpable onboard the German ships as the order was given. The force put about that same evening and reached Narvik without incident the next day, 6 July.[25]

The order to scatter in the constricted waters of the Barents Sea left the hapless merchantmen to the mercy of the Germans. Of the convoy's original 33 vessels, the Germans sunk 24, including 22 precious merchantmen with their even more precious cargo. With them went 153 unfortunate souls, 430 tanks, 210 aircraft, 3,350 motor vehicles of various types, and almost 100,000 tons of general cargo, including electronics and ammunition. As noted, the German ships returned

to Narvik without incident, although the commander of the patrolling Soviet submarine *K-21* claimed afterward that he had torpedoed *Tirpitz* during her foray. Even if the Soviets fired torpedoes at the ships, the Germans took no notice of the attack.[26]

The battle for PQ-17 was a disaster for the Allies. Even without the benefit of hindsight, the Admiralty's order to scatter was highly controversial—although there were admittedly few, if any, good choices available to Admiral Pound. Had PQ-17 not scattered it may well have been intercepted by Schniewind's ships and annihilated anyway. This was the end result of risking the passage of a slow convoy in continuous daylight, across an area infested by U-boats and dominated by German air power. Ultimately, the answer to Pound's fateful decision lies in the fact that the mere threat of the German battleship had caused the British leadership to "jump the gun" and consign PQ-17 to its doom. Thus, *Tirpitz* was instrumental in bringing about one of the most decisive Allied defeats at sea without firing a single shot at an enemy vessel. The political ramifications of the PQ-17 disaster continued long after the event; they hurt not only the Royal Navy's prestige but also caused immense bitterness with the Allied merchant navies, and universal condemnation from the United States and USSR, both of which accused the British of bungling and gross misjudgment. The subsequent postponement of the Murmansk convoys incensed Soviet dictator Josef Stalin and further damaged Anglo-Soviet relations, at a time when the outcome of the war in the East was seen to hang in the balance. The Allies did not resume Arctic summer convoys until *Tirpitz* was removed from the picture.[27]

Tirpitz remained in Bogen near Narvik until late October, when it was decided to return her to Fættenfjord for an overhaul and refit. Northern Norway, severely lacking in infrastructure, was no place to perform extended repairs on a vessel of her size. It was during this time, with *Tirpitz* undergoing repairs, that the Battle of the Barents Sea (Operation *Regenbogen*) was fought on the last day of 1942. Its outcome would have monumental consequences for the Kriegsmarine surface fleet.

The battle opened in characteristically poor weather conditions. Vice-Admiral Kummetz, aboard flagship *Admiral Hipper,* engaged convoy JW-51B in concert with *Lützow* and six destroyers, only to be brusquely driven off by the outgunned British defenders. Each side lost one destroyer in the confused exchange, but it was a surprising and clear-cut victory for the Royal Navy, which through its spirited conduct saved the convoy. The German fleet's bungled attack threw Hitler into a towering rage. The battle's outcome led to Grand-Admiral Raeder's resignation and to the Führer's death sentence on the German surface

fleet, which he demanded be scrapped as it was not worth its weight in steel. Hitler ignored the fact that his own restrictive policies had served to hamper Kummetz's freedom of action. In any event, the new commander-in-chief of the Kriegsmarine, Admiral Karl Dönitz, a Hitler favorite and commander of the U-boat arm, convinced the Führer, once he had calmed down, that most of the surface ships be retained, *Tirpitz* especially, which he saw as a valuable fleet-in-being. Dönitz thus prevented Hitler from handing the Allies a bloodless naval victory.[28]

Tirpitz remained in Fættenfjord until completion of sea trials in early March 1943, when she was declared fully operational. She was transferred to Bogen once more, where she could remain close to the Allied convoy routes. Several smaller vessels accompanied her. In Bogen, and then later in Kåfjord (a part of Altafjord), from late March to September 1943 she formed the nucleus of a small but powerful force, which included *Lützow* and the battleship *Scharnhorst*. From their northern lair, the German ships loomed as ever-present threats to the Allied convoys.[29]

In September 1943, *Tirpitz* conducted what would be the only operational deployment in which she fired her main guns in anger. As opposed to her abortive forays against the Arctic convoys, Operation *Sizilien*'s scope was much more limited, and, to paraphrase a Norwegian adage, using "cannons to shoot sparrows."[30] *Sizilien*'s objective was the destruction of a tiny Allied weather station in the Norwegian Arctic territory of Svalbard, garrisoned by no more than 150 soldiers, mainly Norwegians. To accomplish this task, the Germans called on not only *Tirpitz*, but also sent forth *Scharnhorst* and a destroyer screen. It was an overwhelming show of force, as much for the Allies as for the German naval leadership to demonstrate to the Führer and to themselves that the Kriegsmarine surface fleet could still prove useful.[31]

Needless to say, there was little the Norwegians on Svalbard could do against the guns of two German battleships. On board was a contingent of 615 men from the army's 349th Infantry Regiment. The Allied soldiers not killed or captured fled into the mountains as the enemy troops landed on the island. The German attack killed six Allied soldiers, while capturing 41 men. The Germans returned to Norway unmolested by the British Home Fleet, and put into Kåfjord on 9 September. If nothing else, the German foray had given the ships' crews a chance to practice their gunnery. In strategic terms, however, the attack was nearly worthless.[32]

Sizilien was the third and final operational deployment *Tirpitz* would make in World War II. Shortly after returning to Norway, a daring British midget submarine attack crippled the ship and left her in various stages of repair until

March 1944. By then the naval war had long since been decided, and any effect the battleship could hope to have on Allied naval strategy, directly or indirectly, was imaginary. Nonetheless, Allied bombing raids continued to hound *Tirpitz* as she was brought back to operational readiness, and in late July of that year she put to the open sea for the last time, conducting a brief exercise off the Norwegian coast with five destroyers.[33]

By mid-September 1944, accumulated damage from British bombs more or less permanently put the battleship out of action, so the Germans decided to move her to shallow water near Tromsø in northern Norway for use as a floating coastal battery. It was to be her final voyage. The battleship limped from Kåfjord that October, anchoring off Håkøy Island after an uneventful passage. On 12 November 1944 she was hit by several massive "Tallboy" bombs dropped from specially modified Royal Air Force Lancasters and capsized, taking 971 of her crew with her. Rescuers eventually saved eighty-seven men trapped inside the hull by cutting holes in her bottom as she lay protruding above the water, like some enormous beached whale. World War II in Europe ended six months later, and from 1948 until 1957, a Norwegian firm scrapped the wreck in situ.[34]

For nearly three years, *Tirpitz* remained a thorn in the side of Allied naval planners, and while lurking in Norway's picturesque fjords represented her own fleet-in-being. In hindsight, the Allies doubtlessly overestimated the danger of the German warship on their naval supremacy. Prime Minister Winston Churchill perhaps best illustrates the perceived threat *Tirpitz* posed to the British in a letter to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Hastings Ismay, in January 1942: "The destruction or even crippling of this ship is the greatest event at sea at the present time. No other target is comparable to it . . . the whole strategy of the war turns at this period on this ship."[35]

Churchill's words illustrate how paranoid the British were of the battleship and how effective she ultimately became as fleet-in-being in Norway. It should be kept in mind that at the same time as Churchill's words were being put to paper, the British were fighting tooth and nail in the Mediterranean, had just lost two capital ships, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, to the Japanese, and were in serious danger of losing Singapore, the crown jewel of their empire in the Far East. The Prime Minister feared *Tirpitz*—"The Beast"—and was as obsessed with her destruction as Hitler was obsessed with keeping her in Norway to guard against an imaginary Allied invasion. Churchill and British naval planners saw the battleship as a constant menace to their maritime dominance and, taking no chances, acted accordingly. This attitude helps put the thirty-nine different direct and indirect attacks (thirty-seven British, two Soviet) on the battleship between 1940 and 1944,

in their proper context.[36]

The mere presence of *Tirpitz* as a fleet-in-being in Norway tied down considerable enemy resources. These would have been of great value to the hard pressed Allies on other fronts, especially in 1942. The British regularly called upon the Home Fleet, based at Scapa Flow in northern Scotland, to provide long distance protection for the Arctic convoys in case the beast should come out of her lair. British and American heavy warships remained off Norway while the naval war teetered on disaster in other theatres. The Home Fleet's assets would without a doubt have proven useful in either the Mediterranean or South Pacific, where the Royal Navy was fighting for its life bringing convoys to Malta, while at the same time trying to check the Japanese rampage in South East Asia and the Indian Ocean. Additionally, the allocation of destroyers to screen the Home Fleet for its sorties against *Tirpitz* also meant that these small warships were unavailable to escort convoys and to help counter the U-boat menace in the Atlantic, which reached its last, great crisis point in 1942.[37]

British efforts to neutralize *Tirpitz* comprised a multitude of schemes, some more imaginative than others. The most common attacks mounted on the battleship while in Germany as well as in Norway consisted of Royal Air Force Bomber Command raids and Royal Navy carrier airstrikes. By and large these raids achieved little success until 1944, by which time *Tirpitz* had ceased to play any practical role in the war. Had the British air raids met with success in 1942 the effort would doubtlessly have been worth it. However, by the time the air raids finally succeeded, the real reason for mounting them—neutralizing *Tirpitz* to keep the sea lanes safe–no longer existed.

Though costly, the September 1943 "X-craft" midget submarine attack on *Tirpitz*—which left her crippled for six months—effectively ended the threat of the German battleship to the Arctic convoys, which resumed their runs to the Soviet Union that November. Though the Germans brought the ship back to operational readiness the following spring, there was no conceivable way for her to directly affect the naval war from then on. Had she dared to go to sea in 1944 there is little reason to believe her fate would have been any different than that which befell *Scharnhorst* off the North Cape.[38]

The story of Axis battleships—German, Italian, and Japanese—in World War II presents a sobering picture. Unlike their Allied counterparts, the Axis vessels never really found a purpose for which they were well suited. German capital ship raiding doctrine, pioneered by Grand-Admiral Raeder, proved a flawed concept and a strategic dead-end. In addition, the Axis navies rarely conducted shore bombardment and support of amphibious landings. Lastly, in the few classic

fleet engagements and battleship duels that did occur during the war, their opponents usually bested the Axis battleships (the notable exception being *Bismarck*'s spectacular destruction of battlecruiser *Hood* in May 1941).

Against the backdrop of her Axis counterparts, however, *Tirpitz* was—by virtue of her comparatively long career as a fleet-in-being—an exception to this trend. No other individual Axis warship tied down as many Allied resources and was the singular focus of so much enemy attention in World War II. The effect the ship had on the war was out of all proportion to her actual utility. To the British, her mere existence was the source of immense anxiety. This innate fear of the German battleship in turn had unfortunate consequences for the Allied war effort. The virtual destruction of PQ-17 in July 1942 might not have happened had the British Admiralty kept its head over the question of whether or not *Tirpitz* had put to sea.

By the time the Allies were able to first cripple, then sink *Tirpitz,* the naval war in Europe and the Atlantic was for all intents and purposes won. There was little, if any, way the German battleship could practically affect the war from 1943 onward. Nevertheless, she continued to be an object of incessant British attention right up to her sinking off Håkøy Island in November 1944, when she was so battered and decrepit that she was useful only as a floating battery. It is no small irony that *Tirpitz,* a vessel that never fired her guns in anger against an enemy counterpart, may arguably have been the most effective Axis battleship of World War II.

Notes

1. In the unflattering words of author Ludovic Kennedy, the ship "lived an invalid's life and died a cripple's death." Ludovic Kennedy, quoted in Dan Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Great Struggle at Sea* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 365.

2. Pietro Badoglio, quoted in Donald Macintyre, *The Naval War Against Hitler* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 155.

3. Dudley Pound, quoted in Vincent P. O'Hara, *Struggle for the Middle Sea: The Great Navies at War in the Mediterranean Theater, 1940–1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), Kindle eBook Loc. 5984.

4. Robert C. Rubel, "Talking about Sea Control," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 4 (2010): 40, accessed 7 November 2015, http://search.proquest.com/docview/750836496?accountid=8289.

5. Laurence Lafore, *The Long Fuse: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War I* (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1971), 131–134.

6. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72–73. Nazi Germany, of course, had no intention of actually abiding by the terms of the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement.

7. Tony Gibbons, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Battleships* (New York: Crescent Books, 1983), 248–249; Erich Raeder, *My Life*, trans. Henry W. Drexel (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1960), 272–273; Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 60, 65–66; Weinberg, *Germany, Hitler and World War II*, 85–86.

8. Bernard Ireland, *Jane's Battleships of the 20th Century* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 40; Niklas Zetterling and Michael Tamerlander, *Tirpitz: The Life and Death of Germany's Last Super Battleship* (Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers, 2009), 53, 108, 110, 121.

9. Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 82, 93.

10. Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz,* 48, 52–55.

11. John Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz*, accessed 19 October 2015, http://www.bismarck-class.dk/tirpitz/tiroperationhist.html; Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz,* 48, 56.

12. Gibbons, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Battleships*, 254–255.

13. Gibbons, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Battleships,* 266; Janusz Skulski, *Anatomy of the Ship: The Battleship Yamato* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 10; Jonathan Parshall, "Battleship Comparison," The Imperial Japanese Navy Page: Nihon Kaigun, accessed 9 November 2015, http://www.combinedfleet.com/baddest.htm. Jonathan Parshall, an expert on the Imperial Japanese Navy, has conducted a comparative study ranking the top World War II battleships against one another. The results are interesting, although he appears to sell the *Bismarck* class short.

14. Gibbons, *The Complete Encyclopedia of Battleships,* 255.

15. Roger Chesneau, ed., *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships, 1922-1946* (New York: Mayflower Books, 1980), 221, 224; Parshall, "Battleship Comparison," accessed 9 November 2015.

16. Richard Humble, "Sinking the *Scharnhorst*," in *History of the Second World War*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (London: Phoebus Publishing Ltd, 1966), 1593–1596; Vincent P. O'Hara, *On Seas Contested: The Seven Great Navies of the Second World War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010), Kindle eBook Loc. 1517–1527. The Germans used radar operationally for detection, but not for gunnery.

17. Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," accessed 19 October 2015; Siegfried Breyer, *Battleship Tirpitz* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, 1989), 25.

18. Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz,* 333–334.

19. Ibid., 26–27.

20. Ibid., 29–30.

21. Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 283.

22. Ireland, *Jane's Battleships of the 20th Century*, 42–43; Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 282–283; Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz,* 121. "Pocket-battleship" was an alternate designation for Germany's unique 11-in. gunned cruisers, the most famous of which was perhaps *Graf Spee*, scuttled early in the war.

23. Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 282–283; Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz,* 121, 123.

24. Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 284–285.

25. Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 286; Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz*, 137–138.

26. Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," accessed 19 October 2015; Guðmundur Helgason, "PQ-17," The U-boat Wars, accessed 29 October 2015, http://www.uboat.net/ops/convoys/convoys.php?convoy=PQ-17; Asbjørn Jaklin, *Nordfronten: Hitlers Skjebneområde* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 2006), 130; Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz*, 137.

27. Helgason, "PQ-17," accessed 29 October 2015; Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz*, 140–141. A lion's share of the merchant ships on the Murmansk run were American.

28. Karl Dönitz, *Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days*, trans. R.H. Stevens (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1959), 372–273; Dudley Pope, "Battle of the Barents Sea," in *History of the Second World War*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (London: Phoebus Publishing Ltd, 1966), 1177–1183.

29. Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," accessed 19 October 2015; Breyer, *Battleship Tirpitz*, 26.

30. Jaklin, *Nordfronten*, 180.

31. Ibid., 181.

32. Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," accessed 19 October 2015; Jaklin, *Nordfronten,* 181–183.

33. Breyer, *Battleship Tirpitz*, 40–41.

34. Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," accessed 19 October 2015; Van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign,* 364–365.

35. Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz*, 56–57.

36. Asmussen, "*Tirpitz* Operational History," accessed 19 October 2015.

37. O'Hara, *Struggle for the Middle Sea*, Loc. 4251–4475, 4493–4568; Peter Padfield, *War Beneath the Sea: Submarine Conflict During World War II* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1995), 275. In the Mediterranean at this time the convoy war had reached its climax, with three British operations to relieve Malta by sea—*Harpoon*, *Vigorous*, and *Pedestal*—sustaining heavy losses.

38. Zetterling and Tamerlander, *Tirpitz*, 251–252, 327.

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