
Opening Extract from...

The Battle of the Atlantic

How the Allies Won the War

Written by Jonathan Dimbley

Published by Viking

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JONATHAN DIMBLEBY

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Viking is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

First published 2015
001

Set in 12/14.75 pt Bembo Book MT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–18660–2
TRADE PAPERBACK ISBN: 978–0–241–18661–9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

1. The Phoney War that Wasn't

On Sunday 3 September 1939, at 11.15 a.m., Nella Last, a housewife who lived in Barrow-in-Furness, turned on her wireless to hear the prime minister, Neville Chamberlain – honouring his commitment to Poland – announce that Britain had declared war against Germany. Listening with her was her husband, a joiner by trade, and her two sons, one of whom had just been called up for National Service. Later, she watched her 'boys' with others on the local beach at Walney as they filled sandbags against the threat of air raids. 'I could tell by the dazed look on many faces that I had not been alone in my belief that "something" would turn up to prevent war . . .' she wrote in the diary that she was to keep throughout the war and beyond.[1] That evening, with her family about her, she tried to relax but found it impossible: 'I've tried deep breathing, relaxing knitting and more aspirins than I can remember, but all I can see are those boys with their look of "beyond".'[2]

On the same day, immediately after Neville Chamberlain's broadcast, Winston Churchill left his apartment with his wife, Clemmie, and walked a hundred yards down the street to the open basement which had been reserved as a bomb shelter for local residents and where the tenants of some half a dozen flats had already gathered. He stood at the door of the property and in his imagination 'drew pictures of ruin and carnage and vast explosions shaking the ground; of buildings clattering down in dust and rubble, of fire-brigades and ambulances scurrying through the smoke, beneath the drone of hostile aeroplanes'.[3] After the all-clear he went down to the House of Commons, where he took his customary place on the backbenches, at which point, he wrote later, 'a very strong sense of calm came over me . . . I felt a serenity of mind and was conscious of a kind of uplifted detachment from human and personal affairs.'[4] This reverie was interrupted by a meeting with Chamberlain in his room at which the prime minister invited his scourge of many years to serve in the War Cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty. By 6 p.m. that evening he was at his desk. Churchill's 'wilderness years' were over. The word was soon out as, to his great

satisfaction, the Board of the Admiralty sent a signal to every man in the fleet: 'Winston is back'. Within hours, the first crisis of the Second World War was upon him.

On that day, too, Barbara Bailey, the thirty-four-year-old daughter of a London solicitor, was a passenger aboard the SS *Athenia* when she heard the news that Britain was at war. As soon as the captain posted Chamberlain's declaration on the ship's notice board, a shiver of apprehension rippled swiftly through the vessel. Barbara Bailey broke down in tears, not so much from fear as the sense that she was alone and friendless. Two days earlier, just before the liner's departure from Liverpool bound for Montreal, she had written a letter to her mother from the Adelphi Hotel. Distraught at the collapse of a love affair, she had decided to make a fresh start in Canada. 'Darling, darling, mother,' she wrote,

> Perhaps I am wrong to leave, but I am just letting fate guide me . . . It's all so strange but I'll be all right – please don't worry about me – it's you all I am so worried over – please take care of each other. I'm terribly sorry for my lack of patience – especially with Daddy. I am determined to come back well and helpful to you all . . . And now, goodbye to you all and take care of yourselves, my darling family. All my love.[5]

As dusk began to haze the evening sky, the *Athenia* was steaming at fifteen knots into a heavy swell some 200 miles from the Irish coast. The press of people wanting to escape Europe as the storm clouds threatened ever more ominously meant that the liner was more heavily laden than usual. Among the 1,102 passengers on board were 311 Americans, 469 Canadians and some 150 refugees from the Continent, 34 of whom were German Jews. The remainder were British and Irish nationals, including a party of children on their way to a place of safety in Canada. Sharp-eyed passengers noticed great activity on deck as the ship's crew removed the covers from the vessel's twenty-six lifeboats (more than enough to accommodate the ship's complement), readied fire hoses and placed shields over deck lights. By the evening, many passengers had succumbed to seasickness and retreated to their cabins. Barbara Bailey elected to take supper in the dining room.

At 7.43 p.m., a little over eight hours after Chamberlain's announcement, there was an explosion on board, the sound of which reverberated along the hull and through every deck. The vessel tilted to port. Chairs

and tables slid in the same direction, passengers flailed about one another, falling to their hands and knees as they sought a door handle or a rail to give them a purchase. Barbara Bailey managed to remain seated as dishes crashed about her and fellow diners fled for the stairs in alarm. When her two dining companions leapt up to follow the rush, she sought to restrain them, raising her voice above the wailing hubbub to exclaim, 'For God's sake, sit still. We're probably doomed, but don't let's get crushed to death.'

As the torpedo struck, the lights in the lounge went out. Passengers stampeded towards the staircase leading up to the upper decks. Still in the dining room, which was now otherwise deserted, Barbara Bailey sat as if paralysed by shock but in fact stricken by waves of misery at the memories of the lover she had lost and the endless rows with her father; she kept repeating to herself, 'Nobody loves me, nobody loves me.'[6] She was startled from this reverie when the chief steward peered into the gloom shouting, 'Is everybody out?' She left her seat and joined the throng on deck.

As the *Athenia* settled more heavily into the Atlantic, the crew acted with speed and proficiency as they sought to muster the passengers into orderly queues for the lifeboats and to quell the panic by which some of them had been seized. It was not easy. In the melee, husbands were separated from wives and parents from children. A woman shouted 'For God's sake help me find my baby.' A little boy screamed 'I'll never see my Daddy again.' The confusion on the crowded decks was aggravated by mutual incomprehension. Few, if any, of the English-speakers understood Polish, Czech, Romanian or German. The converse was also true. Refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe, determined to clamber into crowded lifeboats clinging to the suitcases, baskets and blanketed bundles which contained the remains of their worldly goods, were uncomprehending as other passengers yelled at them in the frenzy of fear. For the most part, however, a semblance of order and restraint soon prevailed. On the basis of many interviews with survivors, Max Caulfield was to write, 'While some were still a little hysterical and emotional, others stood like graven statues, too stunned to move, trying to reconcile the sight of the sprawling bodies around No. 5 hatch with the normality of ship life as it had been only an hour before . . .'[7] At one point, a young Protestant minister clambered onto an elevated portion of the deck, where he was seen to raise his arms to the heavens.

Below him a knot of passengers knelt as he offered them all prayers for salvation.

With great dexterity, the crew managed to manoeuvre every lifeboat into the water with little mishap. It was a tricky evacuation. Isabelle Coullie, who had managed to find her way through the throng of confused and terrified passengers to find the lifeboat station, lost her grip as she clambered down the rope into the boat allocated to her and her husband, John, and, like several others, fell into the ocean. Her husband at once leapt in to save her. With difficulty they were both hauled into the lifeboat, where John helped four others to row their heavy cargo of women and children clear of the stricken liner. In the process, he recalled 'we shipped a lot of water, and also got soaked . . . Bell [Isabelle] got sick and then sometime later I was sick – we had swallowed so much oil and the taste was awful. Then it got cold and we were utterly miserable.'[8]

By contrast, Barbara Bailey had recovered herself. The motion of the boat disturbed her not at all and she was suddenly exhilarated by the spray that whipped across her face. When two women became distressed as the lifeboat started to ship water, she told them, 'I love the sea. The sea is kind. The sea hasn't done this to you. And if death were to come, it would come quickly.'[9] As night fell, the sea around the *Athenia* was speckled by lifeboats filled with survivors in varying degrees of relief, exhaustion and distress waiting to be rescued from the Atlantic chill. Still on board the *Athenia*, the wireless operator had managed to send out an SOS distress signal to all ships in the vicinity. A clutch of destroyers and other vessels was soon steaming at full speed to the scene, most of them arriving in the early hours of the following morning. After nine hours adrift, the Coullies were among those picked up by a Swedish ship, where they were wrapped in blankets and dosed with hot soup. One by one, and with difficulty in a rising sea, most of those who had escaped from the *Athenia* were similarly plucked to safety.

Fourteen hours after the torpedo struck her on the port bow, the SS *Athenia* reared up and, with barely a sound, slipped under the waves. Altogether, 118 people lost their lives, 93 of whom were passengers, including 16 children. If the *Athenia* had not remained afloat for so long, and if there had been no rescue ships in the area, the loss of life would have been very much higher.

The sinking of the *Athenia* was not only a disaster for those directly affected but it came as a profound shock to the Admiralty, which had

lulled itself into the assumption that the German U-boats would avoid attacking passenger liners, which were supposedly exempt from enemy action under the elaborate rules of engagement negotiated between the world's major naval powers in the years leading up to the outbreak of war. Moreover, the sinking revealed in a single blow how unready Britain was for a conflict in which the U-boat would become Germany's principal weapon against Allied merchant shipping.

The rejoicing in the Royal Navy at Churchill's return to the Admiralty was more equivocal than the new First Lord had allowed himself to presume. For some, who had long memories of the First World War, the signal 'Winston is back' was greeted with mixed feelings. Though his eloquent belligerence towards the enemy boded well, he had acquired a well-earned reputation in those years for interfering in matters which were either beneath or beyond his competence as a cabinet minister. As a result he fell out with a succession of senior officers who were obliged to defer to him as their political master. His habit of sending signals to the fleet without the authority of his peers on the Board and, in the view of one of their number, of issuing 'peremptory orders' to the Sea Lords, rankled greatly.[10] He was bombastic, impetuous, intemperate and tactless – traits which led the loyal biographer of another First Sea Lord, Prince Louis of Battenberg, to liken the new incumbent to a 'thwarted spoilt school boy'.[11]

With contumely heaped upon him by his political adversaries and by a press which bayed for his removal from high office after the debacle at Gallipoli in 1915 – for which he was held primarily responsible – Churchill was a much diminished force until the emergence of Hitler on the European stage. His outspoken denunciation of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement won him few political friends at Westminster but his lonely defiance against the weight of the political establishment made him, once again, a force to reckon with. Now, with the outbreak of a war which, almost alone, he had both foreseen and advocated, his exile was at an end. His political gifts were suddenly indispensable to the damaged credibility of the prime minister; his place in the Cabinet assured.

'So it was', he wrote later, 'that I came again to the room I had quitted in pain and sorrow almost exactly a quarter of a century earlier.'[12] Wholly unrepentant about his role in the Gallipoli fiasco, which he

attributed to misfortune and the tactical errors of others, he lost no time in letting those about him know that he was indeed back, not only in charge but as interventionist as ever. Within hours he summoned Admiral Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, to his presence. Churchill had been sharply critical of the way in which the British fleet in the Mediterranean, under Pound's command, had been deployed earlier in the year. Now, by Churchill's account, 'We eyed each other amicably if doubtfully.'[13] Pound had been in the role for three months and only because his predecessor Admiral Roger Backhouse (who had himself been in the post for only seven months) had developed a brain tumour and been forced to retire prematurely. As a front-line admiral, Pound had been relieved to have been overlooked in favour of Backhouse, telling a friend, 'I can hardly believe my luck . . . Just think I am not to be First Sea Lord but instead I am to stay with the fleet for another extra year . . . and then they tell me they will make me an Admiral of the Fleet and I can retire straight from the sea.'[14] Now, unexpectedly, he found himself in the top job at a critical moment.

Pound was the son of an Eton scholar who favoured life in the Devon countryside. His mother was a domineering American of eccentric habits, which included an apparently uncontrollable urge to shoplift. When she and her husband separated, Dudley, who was still a child, was brought up by his father in a bucolic backwater where his life was in every way unexceptional: his tastes were conventional and his talents indeterminate. In 1891, at the age of thirteen, he joined HMS *Britannia*, a floating hulk moored in the River Dart which served as the training centre for the navy's officer class. Though the course required proficiency in mathematics, it was otherwise notable for its absence of intellectual rigour. As Pound's biographer has noted, 'The cadets were strained physically, but not mentally, and it may be said that education, as opposed to professional training, ended for many at 13.'[15] Pound emerged from his exertions at *Britannia* with enough qualifications to promote an upwardly mobile career: 'Very zealous and of very good judgement' was the characteristic assessment of one of his commanding officers. By 1915, a captain at the comparatively young age of thirty-seven, he was posted to work as a staff officer under Admiral Fisher, the brilliant and mercurial First Sea Lord brought out of retirement at the start of the war.

Pound was less impressed by Fisher than Churchill had been, confiding

to a colleague later that the septuagenarian was 'a very old man, and really only able to put in about 2 hours work a day at the Admiralty, and spent the rest of the day at his own leisure'.[16] This was not only uncharitable but untrue; the young captain seemed to have forgotten or not known that Fisher was usually at his desk by 5 a.m., well before others, including Pound, were accustomed to arrive for work. But like many ambitious young men, Pound was not generously endowed with benevolence. His training had been stern and narrow and this was reflected in his demeanour and attitude. However, within the confines of the prevailing orthodoxies, he was distinguished by a calm intelligence, a gift for clear if cautious thought, and a propensity for tireless work. His talent for painstaking organization may not have excited envious comment but it helped assure his seamless rise to the top. One close observer noted, 'He wore a lugubrious air and his mere entry into the room made the occupants feel grave.'[17] If his physical presence was not immediately commanding, his manner was forceful and, though he was generally equable, a well-developed sense of his own status went hand in hand with a quick temper.

On one occasion he castigated two young officers for damage caused to their destroyers in a gale which put both ships temporarily out of commission. Allegedly frothing at the mouth in fury, he paraded them on his quarterdeck and ordered their courts martial. However, once he had simmered down, he was persuaded to establish a court of inquiry instead; and when this exonerated the two men of any blame, he was swift to atone for his impetuosity by signalling the news to the whole fleet. This was not the only such incident. More startling was his decision to court-martial a trusted colleague, Commander Norris, for allegedly allowing his 'despatch vessel' to drag aground during a storm. Norris was to recall that, on appointing him, Pound had warned that 'if I ever put a foot wrong in this job I could expect nothing else than "three times the stick" . . . [just as] he would serve out to others'.[18] Even though Norris had already been cleared by a court of inquiry, Pound persisted in establishing a court martial in his cabin. This similarly exonerated Norris. To celebrate this verdict, Pound immediately presented his friend with a bottle of champagne.

By the time of his appointment as First Sea Lord, Pound had acquired a reputation for diligence and decency. But he had yet to face any test comparable to the multiplicity of challenges that now faced him. The

sinking of the *Athenia* on the very first day of the war exploded like a howitzer shell in the Admiralty, a reminder of a terrible period in the Great War when the Germans waged 'unrestricted' submarine warfare against Allied shipping that would have been calamitous if the United States had not come to Britain's rescue in 1917.

For the first two years of the First World War, the threat from what was then a new form of maritime technology – the submarine – was recognized but not given due weight. With the singular exception of a sage warning by Admiral Fisher, the Admiralty had convinced itself that the main danger to Britain's trade came not from the German navy's small posse of U-boats but from Kaiser Wilhelm II's fleet of capital ships, the so-called 'commerce raiders' which, it was believed, had made convoys redundant in the age of steam. Departing from a tradition which had originated in the Napoleonic wars, the admirals allowed themselves to believe that coal-fired ships travelling together in large numbers and pumping smoke into the atmosphere would form plumper targets for marauding enemy ships than if they travelled alone. Moreover, they also regarded the convoy system as outmoded because merchant ships, travelling independently, could now be adequately protected by a radio communications network through which the Admiralty in London could identify enemy surface raiders and send Royal Navy cruisers to trap them at those focal points where the international shipping routes converged. Underlying these twin presumptions was an aversion to using warships defensively as convoy escorts when they could be better deployed offensively, operating aggressively – and exhilaratingly – as 'hunting patrols' to confront the enemy in open battle. No less significantly, the wartime government was also under pressure from a phalanx of British shipowners and speculative investors, who argued vehemently against any suggestion that their ships should be shepherded through the war zone under the protection of the Royal Navy. By sailing independently, they insisted, their vessels would sail more rapidly and more frequently to their destinations without the logjams which were bound to occur when upwards of thirty merchant ships arrived en masse at the same destination. That this powerful group profited as handsomely when disaster struck as when their vital cargoes reached port safely may have played a part in their reckoning; it is not an exaggeration to note that the more ships the enemy sank, the richer these individuals became.

They not only benefited from huge insurance payouts every time one of their ships went to the bottom but simultaneously from the growing demand for vessels to replace these losses. Despite the introduction of an excess profit tax, the rewards remained phenomenal.

For all these reasons, the British were slow to recognize the worsening threat from German submarines. By the late autumn of 1916, not only was the U-Boat fleet much larger than it had been at the start of the conflict, but the 'on-off' campaign it had waged against merchant shipping since the start of the war had been resumed with a vengeance. To the British government's consternation, it soon became apparent that vital food stocks – especially of imported grain for bread – were falling faster than they could be replenished. In February 1917 the impending crisis was deepened when the Kaiser formally lifted all restrictions on submarine warfare, warning that any vessel on the high seas was now a target for his U-Boats – which duly started to run amok. By the following month, 25 per cent of the ships setting out on voyages were being sunk before they returned. In turn this led neutral states to curtail their trade with the Allies, which thus fell by a catastrophic 75 per cent. It was now clear that Britain was perilously close to losing the campaign at sea, and thereby its means of prosecuting the war against the Kaiser.

In this critical atmosphere Lloyd George (who had unseated Asquith as prime minister in December) began to press the Admiralty to reinstate the convoy system. The admirals were not only short of suitable escorts but deeply reluctant to change tack, although on those routes where convoys were initiated, the impact was immediate. Between March and May on three cross-Channel routes, the naval staff historian records that 'only nine vessels were lost – all at night – out of a total of 4,000 convoyed. Air escorts were provided by day.'[19] Still, though, the Admiralty was slow to heed the lesson.

In July the Kaiser decided to raise the ante. Allegedly in retaliation for the increasingly successful 'hunger blockade' imposed by the Allies on the Central Powers,[20] he announced that the Kaiserliche Marine (Imperial Navy) would no longer abide by the so-called Prize Rules which ordained that no merchant vessel could be sunk by a submarine until it had been searched and its crew provided with a place of safety. The Kaiser's decision shattered what was left of the international consensus about the conduct of a just war at sea; henceforth, he declared, U-boats would not only be permitted to engage in unrestricted warfare

against all merchant ships entering the war zone but also to sink them on sight and without warning.

Following this unilateral repudiation of the Prize Rules, the overall number of sinkings rose sharply. This led the Admiralty to jump to the conclusion that the two were causally linked: that the surge in sinkings was a direct consequence of Germany's no-holds barred onslaught. In fact, as the available statistics showed, the cause was due to a simultaneous surge in the number of U-boats on patrol, from fewer than thirty at the start of the war to almost seventy by the spring of 1917. As a result, for several months the U-boats continued to wreak havoc in those parts of the ocean where merchant ships lacked close protection by Allied warships and, where possible, by air patrols (including airships) as well.

By this time, however, the United States had entered the war. The sinking of the *Lusitania* on 7 May 1915 with the loss of more than 1,000 lives, including 128 Americans, had outraged opinion in America and round the world but was not of itself regarded as a casus belli by the White House. There were other factors, but the incident which finally goaded President Woodrow Wilson into declaring 'a war to end all wars' against Germany on 6 April 1917 was the sinking of seven unarmed US merchant ships a few weeks earlier. America's intervention was the Kaiser's undoing. It not only helped to deliver the coup de grâce on the battlefield but, with the deployment of some forty US warships on escort duty, transformed the course of the war at sea as well. According to the naval staff historian, drawing on detailed figures which were available to the Admiralty at the time, when merchant ships were under escort, the U-boats were virtually unable to launch an effective attack: 'Submarine after submarine was sighted and attacked before it dived, or was else forced to dive to escape detection . . . Down to the end of December 1917 there was only one instance of a ship in a convoy with air escort being sunk by a U-boat.'[21] In this way, the United States not only saved Britain from being starved into surrender but demonstrated unambiguously the unique contribution of the convoy system, which the Admiralty had resisted for so long, to the catastrophe which now engulfed Germany.

It was against this backdrop that, in 1921, following the Treaty of Versailles, the US government convened a meeting of the major sea powers

in Washington. Its purpose was to prevent a naval arms race and, especially, to impose a new set of rules on maritime warfare to control the threat posed by submarines in any future conflict. Instead the participants were seduced into an elatorate diplomatic quadrille that was to last for the next eighteen years as Britain, the United States, France and Italy sought ways to enhance their naval might vis-à-vis one another, while corralling the latent threat posed by Germany – the recusant at the centre of this masquerade – at the same time.

In the flush of victory, Britain sought to call the tune by pressing for submarines to be outlawed altogether as weapons of war. This was presented as though it were a moral campaign against an inhuman form of warfare but it carried little conviction for those able to detect the self-serving motive behind the British case. Compared with a battleship with which a great maritime nation could rule the waves, the submarine was cheap to build and, with one torpedo, could inflict a mortal blow on any surface warship; greatly to the disadvantage of the British Empire, the submarine thus threatened to alter the balance of maritime power. The Admiralty's proposal was rejected.

Instead, the Americans proposed a new international law defining rules of engagement under which submarines would be subjected to the same protocols as other warships, specifically to an even tougher set of Prize Rules than those the Kaiser had repudiated. Not only would U-boat commanders be required to search a merchant ship before seizing it and to sink it only after its crew had been disembarked but, if this were to prove impracticable, they would also be required by the first article of the US resolution 'to desist from attack and from seizure and to permit the merchant vessel to proceed unmolested'.[22] Despite vigorous objections from the French and Italians, Washington prevailed. On 4 February 1922 a new Submarine Code, framed in virtually the same terms that the United States had originally proposed, was signed into law by all four nations as a key component of what became known as the Washington Naval Treaty.

The French soon backtracked, refusing to ratify the agreement. This led to further debate at the London Naval Conference in 1930. Once again Britain (whose maritime supremacy lay in the Royal Navy's surface fleet) proposed that U-boats should – like chemical weapons – be abolished altogether. This time the United States, alarmed by the rapid production of submarines by Japan, concurred. France still vacillated,

insisting that submarines were not offensive but 'defensive' instruments of war. It took several months of negotiation before the British team cobbled together a final draft to which, by the autumn of 1930, the United States, France, Germany and Japan felt able to put their signatures.

The London Naval Treaty, as it was called, was so ambiguously phrased as to leave almost every important issue unresolved. Six years later, in March 1936, despite – or perhaps because of – these embedded ambiguities, more than thirty nations, including Germany and the Soviet Union (but excluding Japan and Italy, which both now reneged), added their signatures to what had morphed into the Second London Naval Treaty. This document modified the first in minor ways but left its essential elements intact, notably with a series of protocols which outlawed 'unrestricted warfare' on the high seas. As Churchill observed, it was 'the acme of gullibility' to suppose any belligerent nation would uphold the Submarine Code that it embraced.[23]

The Admiralty was convinced that the Kaiser's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare had proved so disastrous that no German leader would make the same mistake ever again. Preoccupied by the threat to the British Empire from the Japanese in the Far East, naval staff officers neglected to analyse data (available since 1920) which showed conclusively that it was the introduction of escorted convoys, supported wherever possible by aircraft, that had saved the nation from collapse in 1917. Instead, they derived comfort from the fact that the leader of the German mission, Joachim von Ribbentrop, had put his signature to an Anglo-German agreement which imposed a permanent restriction on the size of the Kriegsmarine in relation to the Royal Navy (in the ratio of a little over 1 to 3). So long as Hitler adhered to this treaty, the Royal Navy would still be free to confront the Japanese in the Pacific. With the benefit of hindsight, the Admiralty's eagerness to take Ribbentrop at his word is as breathtaking as the spirit of appeasement which clearly infused the British negotiators. While the talks were still in progress, an internal Admiralty memorandum noted: 'In the present mood of Germany it seems probable that the surest way to persuade them to be moderate in their actual performance is to grant them every consideration in theory. In fact they are more likely to build up to submarine parity if we object to their theoretical right to do so, than if we agree that they have a moral justification.'[24]

The Admiralty's readiness to overlook the resurgent U-boat threat in favour of maintaining a battle fleet in the Far East was reinforced by the Royal Navy's traditional romance with battleships and cruisers. After all, it was those great warships that throughout history had taken the fight to the enemy in set-piece battles of the kind made glorious by Admiral Nelson and which, despite the best efforts of the Germans at the Battle of Jutland, had ensured that the British continued to rule the waves. By comparison with the dash and excitement of raiding and plundering their way across the oceans, the task of escorting merchant ships in convoy seemed singularly mundane. In later correspondence with the naval historian Arthur Marder, the Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Caspar John, was to sum up the attitudes of his fellow officers in those years: 'Convoy protection was regarded with martial antipathy by the Navy . . . it was far too defensive in outlook.'[25]

Nor were the shipowners to be ignored. In 1935, the Admiralty's financial secretary, Lord Stanley, told the Commons that, even in the event of hostilities, a convoy system would not be introduced until 'conditions had become so intolerable that they [the shipowners] were prepared to make the necessary sacrifices'. Citing the inevitable delays caused by the need to marshal a convoy at either end of its voyage and pointing to the fact that the fastest vessels in convoy could only travel at the speed of the slowest, Stanley was insouciance personified. Convoys, he reiterated, would be required only 'when sinkings are so great that the country no longer feels justified in allowing ships to sail by themselves but feels that for the protection of their crews the convoy system is necessary'.[26] It was not until 1938, when the risk of war with Germany could no longer be ignored, that the Admiralty felt obliged to modify Stanley's formula. Preparations were now made for the convoy system to be available on the outbreak of war but still with the proviso that this extreme measure would be introduced only if the German U-boats were to breach the 1936 Treaty by once again engaging in 'unrestricted' warfare.

The sinking of the *Athenia*, within hours of Britain's declaration of war, shattered the Admiralty's wishful thinking. The notion that any pretensions to chivalry as defined by the Prize Rules would be at a premium in a clash of maritime arms with the Third Reich seemed to have been mercilessly dispelled. As it turned out, this conclusion proved to be premature but it was enough to set the alarm bells ringing in the

Admiralty. As the news of what had happened spread swiftly around the world, Churchill's first action as First Sea Lord on the morning of 4 September was to ask for an estimate of the existing and potential size of the U-boat fleet. He was informed that the Germans had sixty U-boats and that a further hundred would be ready by early 1940. Two days later, on 6 September, the Admiralty made the formal decision to introduce the convoy system forthwith. But this speed of response masked the fact that the Royal Navy was alarmingly short of escort vessels while those that were available were frequently unsuitable in size and type and their crews were often untrained and ill-prepared. The air support, which in 1917 had played such a large part in deterring the enemy's submarines, was also notable by its absence. To make matters worse, the RAF, an offspring of the naval and army air services which had sprung into independent life in the closing stages of the First World War, was reluctant to release its limited supply of fighters and bombers for what was so widely regarded as the mundane task of safeguarding Britain's maritime supply lines. The Royal Navy – though prepared to do battle against the German and the Japanese surface fleets – was thus woefully ill-equipped for the onslaught that could now be expected from the German U-boats while the Admiralty's enduring disdain for defensive as opposed to offensive warfare was soon to bring the nation perilously close to defeat once again.

The Führer was aghast when he heard that the *Athenia* had been torpedoed by a U-boat. While he was still hopeful that it might be possible to come to terms with Chamberlain's government, Hitler was simultaneously anxious to avoid any provocation which might tilt the United States from neutrality towards belligerency. The Third Reich was far from ready to contemplate conflict with America; in Hitler's mind the subjugation of Europe and the conquest of the Soviet Union were to come first. For this overriding political imperative, Admiral Raeder, the commander-in-chief of the German Navy, had been instructed to ensure that the U-boat fleet should adhere to the rules enshrined in the 1936 Treaty. Raeder disagreed strongly with Hitler's cautious diktat, believing that the U-boat arm of the Kriegsmarine could secure victory by waging 'unrestricted' warfare against all merchant shipping even if America were thereby sucked into the conflict. Nonetheless he duly ordered the commander of the U-boat forces to remind his men of this

directive. Accordingly, at 2 p.m. on 3 September Dönitz issued what he evidently regarded as an unambiguous instruction to the men under his command: 'U-boats to make war on merchant shipping in accordance with operations order . . .', a form of words, he noted in his War Diary for that day, that 'should exclude any misunderstanding as the operations are under the express orders for war on merchant shipping in accordance with Prize Law'.[27]

The sinking of the *Athenia* was a flagrant breach of the Prize Rules as defined in the 1936 Treaty and Berlin was forced swiftly to counter an acute diplomatic embarrassment. Masterminded by the Führer's information minister, Joseph Goebbels, the Third Reich's first wartime effort at 'damage limitation' was both crass and incredible. 'The *Athenia* must have been sunk in error by a British warship or else struck a floating mine of British origin,' the propaganda minister announced on the day of the disaster.[28] In the following days, as Dönitz's biographer, Peter Padfield, has noted, such 'inventions took wing, and the affair was soon shrouded in a fog of absurd distortion'.[29] On 5 September Berlin Radio solemnly announced that, if indeed the *Athenia* had been torpedoed, 'it could only have been done by an English submarine. We believe the present chief of the British Navy, Churchill, capable of even that crime.'[30] Raeder did not shrink from adding to this nonsense by declaring that the British allegation implicating one of the Kriegsmarine's U-boats was an 'abominable lie'.[31] It must have been something of a relief to Berlin (as well as a vindication of Goebbels's methodology) that many Americans appear to have been gulled by this chicanery to the point of concluding that who did what to whom was an open question (which was not finally settled until the Nuremberg trials six years later).

The offending attacker was U-30. After rising to the surface to confirm that he had crippled the *Athenia*, Kapitänleutnant Fritz-Julius Lemp continued to hunt for prey in the seaways around Britain, eventually returning to the submarine base at Wilhelmshaven on 27 September. Under interrogation by Dönitz, he immediately confirmed that he had fired the offending torpedo. Claiming that the *Athenia* had been steering a zigzag course and that her lights had been doused, he protested it was reasonable for him to have concluded that the vessel was an armed merchant cruiser and therefore fair game under the 1936 Treaty Prize Rules. Whether he was sincere or whether the prospective exhilaration of his first kill had warped his judgement cannot be known.

According to his War Diary for 4 September, Dönitz initially thought it 'inconceivable' that a U-boat should have been responsible for the tragedy, but after cross-examining Lemp he ordered the hapless commander to Berlin to repeat his story to Raeder, who passed on the gist of it to Hitler.[32] Returning to Wilhelmshaven, Lemp was placed under 'cabin arrest' by Dönitz but spared the humiliation of a court martial which would have drawn public attention to what he had done. Nor did Dönitz have any qualms about concealing the truth from the outside world. Lemp and his crew were sworn to secrecy while the U-boat's log was doctored to suggest that U-30 had been nowhere near the scene of the sinking. At no point in the internal correspondence between the principals involved in this cover-up is there a word of regret at the loss of innocent human life caused by Lemp's violation of international law.

Lemp had – no doubt inadvertently – defied Hitler's will. The Führer's overriding concern was still to avoid a premature expansion of the war and, within hours of the sinking, he made his displeasure unambiguously clear. Further tightening the restrictions already imposed on submarine warfare by the 1936 Treaty, he announced: 'By order of the Führer and until further orders no hostile action will be taken against passenger liners even when sailing under escort.'[33] This instruction was swiftly followed by others, all designed to reduce the risk that America or France (even after the latter's declaration of war against Germany) might be provoked into retaliation. In his memoirs, Dönitz complained that these orders 'had a very restricting effect on the operations of our U-boats, made very high demands on the powers of observation and identification of their commanders and burdened them with a heavy responsibility. In addition they not infrequently enhanced the danger to which the U-boats were exposed.'[34] This, had they known about it, might have offered a crumb of comfort to those in the Admiralty who had chosen to take German protestations of goodwill at face value.

Dönitz's dismay was shared by Raeder. Both men believed in a no-holds-barred confrontation with the enemy. However, this was the extent of their common ground. Dönitz was a man of clear views but narrow horizons. His presence immediately impressed itself on those about him: he was upright and lean, his demeanour calm and measured. When he spoke, he was terse to a degree that brings to mind the style of General Bernard Montgomery. He cared greatly for the psychological

and material well-being of those who served under him but he inspired more awe than affection. Though he rarely lost his temper, he was as quick to rebuke as he was to praise. He never betrayed anxiety and his certainties rarely, if ever, appeared to be afflicted by self-doubt.

His memoirs, written after his release from Spandau (where he was imprisoned until 1956 after his conviction as a war criminal at Nuremberg), are to be distrusted for their omissions, distortions and self-exculpations but they reveal more about their author than perhaps he intended: that his ambition was vaunting, that he was ruthless, and that he generally held others responsible for his own shortcomings. With an infamous disregard for the evidence, he failed to express any remorse for the deaths of millions of innocent people. It is clear that he either averted his gaze from the crimes of Nazism or was indirectly complicit in them. But his record also reveals that he was an outstanding leader of men who was to pose a greater threat to Allies in the Second World War than any other military commander in the Third Reich.

Dönitz was born in Berlin, in 1891, the son of a modestly prosperous engineer. The heroic stamp of Germany's Prussian heritage was impressed upon him from childhood. Kaiser Wilhelm II's *Weltpolitik* (the policy designed to show the world that Germany was a great power), which had replaced Bismarck's *Realpolitik* (a practical approach to the exercise of power), required the creation of a strong navy to establish the Empire's global hegemony and, in Paul Kennedy's phrase, 'the coming mastery of the German race in the world'.[35] When he was seventeen the Dönitz family moved to Weimar, where Karl came under the spell of Goethe and Schiller, to the extent that he formed a literary society at his college. However, his artistic leanings were overridden by an urge to join the Imperial German Navy, which, under the tutelage of its commander-in-chief, Admiral Tirpitz, was emerging as a force to rival British sea power.

The training of the officer corps was modelled on the Prussian army. In the words of Dönitz's biographer, 'this meant adopting a harsh, high, rather nasal barking, a deliberately crude, often ungrammatical mode of speech, a prickly concern for personal and caste honour . . . and on board ship insistence on exaggerated marks of deference from specialist officers, petty officers and ratings to the person of the elite executive officer'.[36] This extreme environment helped foster the resentment which led to a naval mutiny in 1918 that in turn spawned the revolutionary

uprising that accelerated the downfall of the German Empire and the establishment of the Weimar Republic in the following year. It is a mark of Dönitz's intelligence and ambition that, despite the limitations of his upbringing, he was not contaminated by the sterile authoritarianism of the navy but readily adapted to the changing order.

In January 1917 the twenty-six-year-old Oberleutnant zur See was posted to his first U-boat, which was based in the Adriatic. There is no reason to doubt his enthusiasm for his new world. 'I was fascinated by that unique spirit of comradeship engendered by destiny and hardship shared in the community of a U-boat's crew, where every man's well-being was in the hands of all and where every single man was an indispensable part of the whole,' he was to write. 'Every submariner, I am sure, has experienced in his heart the glow of the open sea and the task entrusted to him, has felt himself to be as rich as a king and would change places with no man.'[37]

His superior officers were quick to discern his qualities. As he rose smoothly up through the long chain of command, via submarines and torpedo boats, report after report portrayed him in ever more glowing terms: 'Excellently gifted for the post, above average, tough and brisk officer . . . Quick in thought and action, prompt in resolution, absolutely reliable . . . All in all – a splendid officer of worthy personality, equally esteemed as officer and man, an always tactful subordinate and excellent comrade,'[38] wrote one of his superior officers when describing the thirty-eight-year-old Korvettenkapitän in 1929. Soon after that, when he was promoted to become a senior staff officer at Wilhelmshaven, his chief of staff noted that he was 'very ambitious and consequently asserts himself to obtain prestige, finding it difficult to subordinate himself and confine himself to his own work sphere'.[39] This intensity of purpose did him no harm. Following the death of President Hindenburg and Hitler's assumption of untrammelled power in 1933, Dönitz, by now in command of a cruiser, the *Emden*, joined every other individual serving in the Reich's armed forces to declare his 'unconditional obedience' to Adolf Hitler. Three months later, on the eve of an extended world tour of duty, his commander-in-chief, Raeder, introduced him to the Führer; there is no record of what if anything he contributed to the conversation but, as an old man, he made it clear he had been greatly impressed by his 'brave and worthy' leader.[40]

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Erich Raeder was fifteen years older than Dönitz. His love for the Fatherland had similarly been instilled in him as a child. Born in Hamburg, the son of a language teacher, his intellectual horizons were narrowly circumscribed by an authoritarian father, who – despite the fervour of the age – banned all political discussion at home. The values that he thus inherited reflected the spirit of the time: contempt for an ailing parliamentary system combined with devotion to the Catholic Church and a visceral faith in the Kaiserliche Marine as 'both the expression of and the instrument for Germanism throughout the world'.[41] Much later, he spoke of his decision to join the navy at the age of eighteen as though it had been preordained, a matter of fate. Physically unprepossessing, his cleverness and diligence nonetheless distinguished him as an outstanding cadet with a gift for coherent strategic analysis. By the outbreak of the First World War, he had risen in seniority to the point where he was selected to play a key part in planning Germany's naval operations against Britain. He worked closely with Admiral Franz Ritter von Hipper, who commanded the German battlecruiser force at the Battle of Jutland in June 1916, during which Raeder's tactical judgement earned the Admiral's lasting gratitude. 'Whatever was granted to me in this war, whatever I have received in the way of honors or distinction,' he wrote later, 'I owe to your clear, energetic and sympathetic support . . . You were my good star and it turned pale when you left me.'[42]

His experience of being Hipper's right-hand man in a battle which had carved a swathe through both navies but ended in a marginal victory for the German fleet marked Raeder indelibly. Following his promotion to commander-in-chief of the Reichsmarine (as the Kaiserliche Marine had been renamed) in 1928, he made it his overriding purpose to rebuild a Hochseeflotte (high seas fleet) that would be worthy of a resurgent Fatherland and as powerful as any in the world. Only the decadence of the Weimar Republic seemed to stand in the way of this vision. Its 'distortion of social life . . . in certain customs and manners alien to our German way of life' was repugnant to him; jazz and modern dance, for example, were not symptoms of a nation resolved to shake off the chains of a national humiliation but of moral decay, manifestations of a society which had lost its bearings. The 1918 naval mutiny – which had begun as a protest but turned into a violent and anarchic uprising by enlisted sailors against the authority of their

commanding officers – was an abhorrent memory. Politically, Raeder was frozen in aspic. Unable or unwilling to distinguish between bolshevism and social democracy, his patriotism was purblind.

As behoved his patrician outlook, he resolved to reinvigorate the Kriegsmarine with 'a distinctive *esprit de corps*' among the officers and men under his command that would stand in exemplary contrast to the virus of degeneracy by which Germany had been afflicted.[43] The emergence of the Nazis seemed to offer precisely that framework for the renaissance he craved both for the nation and for the navy. Facing his accusers at Nuremberg, he portrayed himself as 'only a sailor and soldier, not a politician',[44] whose commitment during the Third Reich had been less to National Socialism than to his country's national interest; and that he had sought to serve the State rather than the Party. Under the Nazis, however, State and Party became so entwined as to be almost inseparable and Raeder – who had no qualms about taking a personal oath of loyalty to the Führer in 1934 – showed little inclination to distinguish between the two.

As he consolidated his hold on the nation, Hitler warmed to Raeder's vision of a dominant Hochseeflotte. In 1935 the Reichsmarine was renamed the Kriegsmarine, while its commander-in-chief had already proved himself equally mutable, adept at sidestepping or subverting the limitations on Germany's rearmament imposed by the Versailles Treaty. Following the Austrian Anschluss in 1938, when it became clear that Czechoslovakia was next in line for occupation, Raeder at once began to prepare the Kriegsmarine for a maritime confrontation with Britain, which he was certain was now inevitable. His only fear was that Hitler would provoke that conflict before the new Hochseeflotte was in a fit state to challenge the might of the Royal Navy.

Raeder's Z-Plan, as it was codenamed, envisaged the construction of an Atlantic naval force capable of severing the British Empire's supply lines and intimidating any other potential adversary. The fleet would comprise a new generation of ten battleships – bigger, faster and with greater firepower than any nation had yet constructed – supported by fifteen pocket battleships (*Deutschland* class heavy cruisers), sixty-five cruisers of varying sizes, eight aircraft carriers and – in a subordinate role, if not as an afterthought – a fleet of 249 U-boats. The vessels would be organized into battle groups powerful enough to cripple Britain's trade, by killing merchant ships in the Atlantic without fear of effective reprisal. However, as he made clear to Hitler, this was a long-term

strategy: his armada would not be ready to challenge Britain's naval hegemony until 1948, a decade hence.

The Führer, who had no experience of naval warfare, could not resist interfering at every level of operational detail, 'from the size and armaments of individual ships to the composition of the fleet'. This habit grew ever more irksome to the precise and organized mind of a naval strategist who had enough self-esteem to regard himself as 'the architect of Germany's naval renaissance'.[45] Since neither man was intimidated by the other, the auguries for an enduring relationship between the pair were not auspicious.

Raeder had to contend not only with Hitler but also with Dönitz, whose own perspective was unencumbered by an appetite to re-establish either a global land empire or its maritime equivalent. As a relatively junior officer – although commanding the nascent U-boat fleet, he was still only a captain in 1938 – Dönitz was not in a position to confront Raeder openly. However, his experience of the First World War had led him ineluctably to the conclusion that a submarine fleet was the most effective weapon with which to destroy Britain's maritime lifeline. Raeder's failure to prioritize the construction of a U-boat fleet over battleships and cruisers infuriated the younger man.[46] So intractable was their dispute that Raeder postponed making any decision about the number of U-boats to be built or at what rate they should come off the production line. As a result only one U-boat was launched in 1937 and only six more in the following year. In exasperation, Dönitz 'pressed with increasing vehemence for an acceleration' in the programme but to no avail.[47]

Raeder's preoccupation with creating a surface fleet that would eventually allow the Third Reich to rule the waves in Britannia's stead was all consuming. In January 1939, apparently convincing himself that the Munich Agreement had given him a licence to treat the entire continent of Europe as Germany's backyard, Hitler reiterated his commitment to the Z-Plan but – conscious that Britain might in due course be roused to object – demanded that the deadline for its completion should be advanced by three years to 1945. When Raeder remonstrated, arguing it would be impossible to complete the construction of so many warships before 1948, Hitler retorted that at least six battleships (including the *Bismarck* and the *Tirpitz*, which were already nearing completion) must be operational by 1944 at the latest: 'If I can build the Third Reich in six years,' he fulminated, 'then the Navy can surely build these ships in six years.'[48]

It was a ludicrous parallel that in any event became redundant the following month when, without warning, Hitler formally abrogated the 1935 agreement between Britain and Germany which had limited the overall size of the Kriegsmarine to 35 per cent of the Royal Navy's total tonnage. Raeder was appalled. Though the Führer's defiance had liberated Raeder from the restraints hitherto imposed by the pretence that the Third Reich would honour its international treaty obligations, Germany still lacked the wherewithal to deliver his master plan for a high seas fleet to challenge the world by 1945. Nor was it much comfort that Hitler chose this moment to promote him to the rank of Grossadmiral (grand admiral). This display of gratitude could not mask the fundamental fact that the German navy was not fit for purpose in anything like the way that either man had intended two years earlier.

Raeder, who had clung to the hope that the Führer would prove wily enough to avoid a premature war against the world's greatest maritime power, was aghast when the Heer (army) invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. Bemoaning the fact that it would no longer be possible to accomplish 'the final solution to the English question',[49] he drafted a memorandum in which he wrote resentfully, 'Today the war against England-France broke out, which the Führer had previously assured us we would not have to confront until 1944 and which he believed he could avoid up to the last minute.' There would be little that the Kriegsmarine's gallant servicemen could now hope to achieve except to demonstrate 'that they know how to die gallantly and thereby to create the foundation of a future rebirth'.[50]

Initially, Dönitz's reaction to Chamberlain's declaration of war was similarly bleak. Newly promoted to the rank of commodore, the U-boat commander was in his operations room at Wilhelmshaven when the news reached him. Evidently unmindful of the staff officers around him he expostulated, 'My God! So it's war against England again,' and walked out of the room. But, collecting himself, he returned soon afterwards, and, with his customary bravura, announced, 'We know our enemy. We have today the weapon and a leadership that can face up to this enemy. The war will last a long time; but if each does his duty we will win. Now to your tasks.'[51] In contrast to Raeder, he exuded an optimism which was unfeigned. While Raeder continued to regard the U-boat as no more than a useful adjunct to his now chimerical Hochseeflotte,

Dönitz genuinely believed that the U-boat was the weapon that would win the war.

There was, though, one proviso. Less than a month earlier he had presented Hitler and Raeder with a shopping list for a grand total of 300 U-boats. Until he had that number at his disposal, he warned, '[we] shall have to content ourselves with a series of pin-pricks against [Britain's] merchant navy'.[52] Three weeks after the sinking of the *Athenia* he seized the opportunity to make the case once more, but this time in a face-to-face meeting with the Führer at Wilhelmshaven. In front of both Raeder and the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, General Keitel, Dönitz delivered Hitler a seven-point plan for victory at sea. The blueprint envisaged a coordinated and concentrated deployment of the U-boat fleet 'to attack merchantmen massed in convoy'; the U-boat, he argued, was 'a weapon capable of dealing Britain a mortal blow at her most vulnerable spot'. Once again, though, he insisted, 'The minimum requisite total is 300 U-boats . . . Given this number of boats, I am convinced that the U-boat arm could achieve decisive success.'[53] Hitler said nothing in response.

Dönitz was not naive. For some five years he had been agitating for an expansion of the U-boat arm, but from his relatively lowly position in the hierarchy of the Third Reich he had achieved little. On the outbreak of war, he had no more than forty-six U-boats under his command (rather fewer than the sixty which the British Admiralty had estimated). Of these, only twenty-two – the Type VIIs – were suitable for prolonged operations in the Atlantic although repairs and maintenance meant that no more than seven would be available to take on the enemy at any one time. To have anything like the number required to inflict the mortal blow he envisaged, the high command would have to approve a major U-boat construction programme as a matter of urgency. This put him at loggerheads with Raeder, who had yet to surrender his ambition to establish a world-class battle fleet in the hope of weakening the Royal Navy by forcing the Admiralty to concentrate its own resources against this threat, thus exposing the British merchant fleet to the depredations of the U-boats and individual surface raiders.

Regardless of their competing views, both men knew that a tug-of-war between the navy, the army and the air force for an inadequate supply of scarce resources – machinery, manpower, and raw materials – was now inevitable. As the Luftwaffe's commander-in-chief and the Führer's

designated deputy, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring had also been entrusted with responsibility for Germany's 'four-year plan'. As the first among equals in the high command, he had snaked his way into Hitler's confidence with a combination of cunning and flattery. This gave him unique authority to dispose of the resources required to realize the Führer's vision. Fully aware of his leader's implacable resolve to secure Lebensraum for the Third Reich by force of arms, he not only offered unquestioning support for the project but also did all in his considerable power to thwart any competing strategy. A continental war to subjugate Europe and then to invade Russia would require a close partnership between the Heer and the Luftwaffe, which meant that the Kriegsmarine would have to take third place in the queue for resources.

Thus on the outbreak of hostilities, both Britain and Germany were ill-prepared and ill-equipped for what was to prove a decisive struggle for mastery in the Atlantic. The mutual self-delusion of the inter-war years – Hitler's belief that he could cheat and lie his way to the conquest of Europe without riling Britain to the point of war mirroring Chamberlain's belief that the Führer would respond favourably to his diplomatic overtures – provided a framework within which both the Royal Navy and the Kriegsmarine were far from ready to face the exigencies of the unfolding conflict. Both Admiral Pound and Grossadmiral Raeder were still convinced, as were their respective political masters, that the war at sea would be won and lost by great battle fleets. As a great maritime power with imperial pretensions that were threatened by the Italians and Japanese as well as the Germans, the British had the most powerful navy in the world. However, the price of this was a shortage of suitable escorts to protect the merchant convoys on which the survival of the nation depended. Conversely, hobbled by global aspirations but strapped for the resources to build a battle fleet to match, the Kriegsmarine lacked the U-boats it needed to sever the enemy's Atlantic lifeline. Thus, fortuitously, the two sides were more evenly matched than the crude balance of naval firepower might suggest. As a result the Battle of the Atlantic acquired a switchback momentum on which neither high command was able to capitalize as each side reacted to sudden and unexpected shifts in fortune with urgent measures to seize the advantage or nullify the threat from the other. At sea, there would be no 'phoney' war. As the sinking of the *Athenia* had inadvertently demonstrated, it was mortal combat from the outset.