

IFS Info 7/2006

Michael Epkenhans

**The Long and Winding
Road to *Weserübung***

Naval Theory, Naval Historiography
and Aggression

Notes on the author

Michael Epkenhans

(b. 1955) is executive director of the Otto-von-Bismarck-Foundation in Friedrichsruh near Hamburg and Privatdozent (assistant professor) at Hamburg University. He has published several books on German naval history in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Long and Winding Road to *Weserübung*

Naval Theory, Naval Historiography, and Aggression

by Michael Epkenhans

Explaining *Weserübung*

Today, the oil leaking from the wreckage of the German Heavy Cruiser "Blücher" at Drøbak is still a reminder of the German assault on Norway in April 1940. This assault on Norway and on Denmark, *Operation Weserübung* as it was generally called, aroused the feelings of many members of the former German navy, the *Kriegsmarine* as it had been called in the Nazi-era, right after the end of World War II and for several decades to come. Why? In the Nuremberg trials, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, commander-in-chief of the *Kriegsmarine* until 1943, was sentenced to life imprisonment, for he was held responsible for the preparation of this act of aggression. Of course, Raeder and his fellow-officers never accepted the charges against themselves and the *Kriegsmarine*. In their eyes, they had been nothing but soldiers, who had done their duty just as the members of Allied forces had done theirs. Accordingly, both during Raeder's imprisonment in the allied prison for war criminals at Spandau and after his premature release in 1955 due to his steadily worsening health, the verdict of Nuremberg was decried as unjust whenever and wherever possible.¹ In 1956, the "question of the Grand Admirals" even caused a fierce debate in parliament. At a public ce-

remony at Wilhelmshaven celebrating the foundation of the new *Bundesmarine*, a high-ranking naval officer, Captain Zenker, took the opportunity and severely criticised the Nuremberg-verdict.² Both admirals, he argued, had not only done their duty towards the German people but had kept the navy's "shield immaculate" before and during World War II. Though Zenker was harshly criticised for his political speech by the opposition in the Bundestag, for he had tried to deny the active role of the former leadership of the *Kriegsmarine* in the Nazi wars of aggression, the spirit of Zenker's speech dominated the debate on the role of the German navy and its commanders-in-chief during World War II for at least another decade, in some ways probably until Dönitz's death in December 1980.

Whereas it seems at least partly understandable, which does not mean that it was acceptable, that members of the former *Kriegsmarine* as well as many others who had been directly or indirectly involved in the planning of the assaults on Denmark and Norway in 1940 had great difficulties in coping with the Nuremberg trial, it is more difficult to understand and to accept what naval historians wrote about *Weserübung* after the war. The most important book on *Weserübung* in

1 The editor's preface in the first volume of the legendary military journal *Marinerundschau*, vol. 50 (1953): 1.

2 Jörg Duppler, *Germania auf dem Meere. Bilder und Dokumente zur deutschen Marinegeschichte* (Hamburg: Mittler, 1998), pp. 25-28.

the first ten-fifteen years after the war was probably written by Walther Hubatsch, a former officer in the German army, then Germany's most influential naval historian for almost three decades, first published in 1952, and, as a revised and extended edition, in 1960.³ By quoting Winston S. Churchill's statement: "The two Admiralties thought with precision along the same lines in correct strategy" on his frontispiece, Hubatsch suggested an interpretation, which was not only meant to pour oil onto the water, but to justify the decision of Grand Admiral Raeder, who was still alive then, and of the members of the *Seekriegsleitung* in late 1939, early 1940 to demand and to plan the occupation of neutral Denmark and Norway. Though Hubatsch gave a detailed description of both the planning and the execution of *Weserübung*, the first combined operation of the German armed forces, he considered *Weserübung* mainly as a pre-emptive strike, perhaps even as a kind of self-defence justified by international law against British plans to occupy Norwegian territory.⁴ "However", Hubatsch also admitted without going into detail, "these considerations, which were based on conclusions erroneously drawn from the navy's experiences during World War I, were also interrelated with the wish to enlarge Germany's strategic position in a naval war."⁵

Of course, Hubatsch's interpretation was fully compatible with a far-reaching consensus in Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. It was an integral part of a policy which attempted to end the debate on Germany's war-guilt, even if this meant ignoring outrageous acts of aggression and annihilation.

In the context of this climate it was hardly astonishing that the publication of two books written by a young Swedish scholar, Carl Axel Gemzell, in the mid-1960s and early 1970s caused an outcry among German naval historians. Gemzell was the first after Herbert Rosinski, a German naval historian

who had been driven into exile on the eve of war, to link *Weserübung* with the ideas of former German Admiral Wolfgang Wegener. Gemzell challenged widely accepted interpretations by trying to prove that the roots of *Weserübung* were to be sought in important debates on German naval strategy and that the genesis of the idea of a base acquisition in Norway could be connected with conflicts in the navy. "In the spring of 1940," he concluded, "this idea finally engaged the highest decision-makers." This attempt both at drawing a line of continuity in German naval thinking and naval planning between the two world wars and, moreover, again highlighting traditionally bitter conflicts within the navy's leadership was regarded as a provocation. Against the background of the Fischer debate on Germany's responsibility for the outbreak of World War I and the expansionist programme pursued by the leadership of Imperial Germany, as well as the fact that the navy had always taken great pains to silence all internal critics in order to appear as a united, homogenous force, this was in fact too much.

Eventually, it was Captain Karl Bidlingmaier, the naval historian at the newly established *Militär-geschichtliches Forschungsamt* at Freiburg, who harshly attacked Gemzell.⁶ Bidlingmaier, who had been stationed in Norway during the war as naval officer on board the battleship "Tirpitz", first contacted all naval decision-makers, who were still alive. In a detailed review, titled "Raeder's Guilt", a title which was omitted when the review was eventually published in the widely read journal *Marinerundschau*, Bidlingmaier, first, accused Gemzell of more or less complete ignorance of naval affairs.⁷ Moreover, he repudiated Gemzell's attempts at establishing a line of continuity between Wegener's ideas and Raeder's decision, and, finally, again

3 Walther Hubatsch, „*Weserübung*“. *Die deutsche Besetzung von Dänemark und Norwegen 1940*, 2nd revised edition (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1960).

4 *Ibid.*, p. 223.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Bidlingsmaier correspondence in the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (henceforth abbreviated BA-MA) RM 6/91; Carl-Alexander Gemzell, *Raeder, Hitler und Skandinavien. Der Kampf für einen maritimen Operationsplan* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965) and by the same author: *Organization, Conflict, and Innovation. A Study of German Naval Strategic Planning 1888-1940* (Lund: Esselte studium, 1973).

7 BA-MA RM 6/91.

emphasized the purely preventive nature of *Weserübung* by referring to selected statements by Churchill about the feasibility of a British occupation of Norway.

This attack on Gemzell was, however, in some respect nothing but the rearguard action of the former naval elite and its historians.⁸ Detailed research has proved that the occupation of Denmark and Norway was a pure act of aggression and not a pre-emptive action. All attempts to turn back the wheel in order to minimize Germany's historical responsibility for what happened between 1940 and 1945 in Scandinavia have proved futile ever since. This does, however, not mean that the debate over continuities and discontinuities in naval thinking and naval planning has come to a standstill in the meantime. This problem is, as we shall see, more complex than one might expect at first sight.

“The Scandinavian Problem”

Germany's interest in parts of Scandinavia in general and in Norway in particular as a forward operating base for its fleet has roots which reach far back into the early twentieth century. The German Emperor, Wilhelm II, not only liked to draw historical analogies but was also influenced deeply by racial ideas. His infamous speeches about the “yellow peril” endangering the future of the Germanic race as well as about the inevitable conflict between Germans and Slavs are proverbial illustrations of his *weltanschauung*, even though one may dispute their political relevance. Similarly, his almost nostalgic summer cruises in Norwegian Fjords, where he felt somewhat at home, his attempts at resuscitating old Germanic habits and traditions or at drawing

somewhat strange lines between the past and the present are well known examples of his conviction that great events in the past were models for the future. Accordingly, in 1889, for example, he gave Otto von Bismarck, Germany's “Iron Chancellor”, the drawing of a Viking ship, thus trying to remind him of a Germanic naval tradition dating back into medieval times.⁹

However, the Emperor as well as the military and, eventually, also the naval leadership were always fully aware of the “Scandinavian problem” as one might call it. Since the war against Denmark in 1864, Germany had an open flank in the north, and though it was unlikely that Denmark alone would try to take revenge for its defeat and the German conquest of Danish territory, Germany's leadership always took into account that Denmark might join its enemies by opening its ports to an allied landing force or allowing them to close the Danish narrows. Though German military thinking was dominated by the scenario of a two-front-war against France and Russia, time and again, the general staff developed plans to occupy Denmark. Similarly, at the turn of the century, the navy became interested in Danish affairs, too. The embarkation on world policy and the challenge to Britain's world and naval supremacy meant that an Anglo-German naval war was likely in the future. As long as the German navy was still too weak to openly challenge the Royal Navy, it was, however, important to decide where to strike. In all German plans for a naval war until the eve of war, the Danish narrows and the Kattegat played an important role accordingly.¹⁰ For,

8 On the navy's attempts to restore its reputation in the 1950s and 1960s see Michael Epkenhans, „Clio und die Marine“, in *Deutsche Marinen im Wandel. Vom Symbol nationaler Einheit zum Instrument internationaler Sicherheit*, ed. Werner Rahn (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005), pp. 363–396, and Jörg Hillmann, „Die Kriegsmarine und ihre Großadmirale. Die Haltbarkeit von Bildern der Kriegsmarine“, in *Militärische Erinnerungskultur. Soldaten im Spiegel von Biographien, Memoiren und Selbstzeugnissen*, eds. Michael Epkenhans, Stig Förster and Karen Hagemann (Paderborn: Schöningh Paderborn, 2006), pp. 291–323.

9 See the original in Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung, Friedrichsruh, *Bismarck papers*, B 130. On the mythic role of Scandinavia in Germany at the turn of the century see the catalogue of the exhibition presented in Sweden, Norway, and Germany in 1998: “Skandinavien och Tyskland. 1800–1914”, ed. Deutsche Historische Museum (Berlin, 1998). In Oslo this exhibition was presented by Norsk Folkemuseum (the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History). A copy of the drawing of the emperor can be found on page 110.

10 See Ivo N. Lambi, *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 191–240, 332–360, 390–415. See also Michael Salewski, „Weserübung 1905? Dänemark im strategischen Kalkül Deutschlands vor dem Ersten

dominating these narrows would not only mean that the German Navy would be able to preserve its naval supremacy in the Baltic, but that it might also be able to plan and conduct successful sorties against a superior force in the North Sea.

Military and naval planning for a war which somehow included Scandinavia, suffered from one decisive weakness. Even in the great European crisis of 1905, the army was unwilling and in fact unable to spare enough troops for the occupation of Danish territory either to prevent a British landing or to improve the navy's strategic position. Accordingly, all plans of operation *Weserübung*, developed in 1905/06, proved futile in the event. The army's preoccupation with a two-front-war against France and Russia, however, did not mean that the problem of Scandinavian neutrality did not bother Germany's leadership anymore. In 1912, for example, when the German ambassador to Copenhagen reported that Danish officials had assured him that they wanted to be neutral in a future war between the great powers, the Emperor bluntly remarked: "No, they have to go with us."¹¹ Germany's attitude towards Norway differed only in degree. All promises about preserving the neutrality of this young nation were not worth the paper on which they were written. The geographic position of both countries, Denmark and Norway, was too tempting from a military point of view, in order to be ignored in wartime.¹² Both governments were, of course, fully aware of the dangers emanating from the geographic position of their respective countries. The Norwegian Chief of the Department for Military Operations, Captain L'Orange, for example, was afraid that Germany might be tempted to occupy Kristiansand or Bergen in order to establish a naval base there, "a

German Gibraltar" as he called it.¹³ Unfortunately, however, both countries were too weak to defend their neutrality against any superior power.

The outbreak of World War I completely changed the situation. Eventually all Scandinavian countries were able to preserve their neutrality. However, time and again, the British and the German military leaderships toyed with the idea of occupying parts of Denmark and, perhaps, even Norway in order to improve their strategic position. Since 1916 plans for the execution of the so-called cases "J" for Denmark and "N" for Norway lay in the drawers of both the General Staff and the Admiral staff.¹⁴ Norway, especially, began to occupy the minds of German naval planners, for they had begun to realize fully that the latter's position might be very advantageous in a naval war. Why?

More than anything else, the course of World War I at sea soon highlighted the strategic dilemma of both German warfare in general as well as naval warfare against a superior naval power, Great Britain, in particular. Generally speaking, Germany proved much more vulnerable to the Allied blockade than most planners in political, military, and naval circles had expected before the war. The short German North Sea coastline containing the main naval bases of Wilhelmshaven and Cuxhaven was defensively very strong: screened by a string of small offshore islands, its estuaries protected by sandbanks, and with a formidable outlying fortress, the island of Heligoland. The Baltic was almost as impregnable, its narrow entrance channels between the Danish islands an obvious lair for submarines and destroyers lying in wait for any ship trying to break through the Danish narrows. Moreover, the canal between the Baltic and the North Sea made possible the rapid movement between both areas of operation.

However, though the German Navy was strong as long as it was on the defensive, it was decisively weak in case it had to or wan-

Weltkrieg", in Michael Salewski, *Die Deutschen und die See. Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Jürgen Elvert and Stefan Lippert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), pp. 138-151.

11 See the Emperor's remarks to the report by the German ambassador to Copenhagen, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, 15.1.1912, in: BA-MA RM 5/1639.

12 Hubarsch, „*Weserübung*“, pp. 2-9.

13 See the report by the German ambassador to Copenhagen, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, 23.2.1913, in: BA-MA RM 5/1639.

14 See the documents in BA-MA RM 5/904, 905, 906 and RM 4948-4950.

ted to take the offensive. The bulk of the British landmass to the west was something of a vast breakwater. Moreover, the Norwegian peninsula to the north made it very difficult to reach the open Atlantic without being detected by superior British forces. All the Grand Fleet had to do was to establish a barrier between the Orkney Islands and the Norwegian coast both to prevent German surface raiders from escaping into the open seas and to cut off Germany from her lifeline of vital imports.

This was, however, a scenario which German naval planners had not foreseen, when they began challenging Britain and the world by embarking on an ambitious programme of naval expansion at the turn of the century. They still expected a battle following traditional patterns of naval warfare, just as Alfred Thayer Mahan, the modern prophet of both naval building and naval strategy had described it in his breathtaking books on the "Influence of sea-power upon History". This meant that the High Seas Fleet expected the Grand Fleet to establish a close blockade of the German Bight and that its attempts at breaking this blockade would result in a battle under the guns of Heligoland.¹⁵

However, this strategy with its many advantages for a navy which had to strike from a defensive position like the German High Seas Fleet soon proved wishful thinking. Why? Of course, many high-ranking British naval officers, influenced by Mahan's writings as well as the myth of the battle of Trafalgar, also regarded a battle right after the outbreak of a war against Germany as an aim in itself. But the development of new weapons such as the torpedo, the mine, and the submarine as well as the incredible costs of modern battleships and battle-cruisers made it seem too risky to pursue a strategy which might prove too costly, if not even fatal in fact.

On the eve of war, the British Admiralty had therefore eventually decided to change its strategy in a war against Germany. Following

Corbett's theory that sea-power meant dominating the lines of communication, the Grand Fleet would simply cut Germany's lifelines by establishing a wide blockade at the entrance of the North Sea. If the German High Seas Fleet tried to break this blockade, it would have to seek battle under unfavourable circumstances – namely far away from its main bases and – depending upon the distance – perhaps even without the important support from its torpedo-boats.

25 years later, in February 1938, Vice-Admiral Kurt Assmann, the director of the German naval archives, was right when he characterized this development as a complete reversal of Tirpitz's idea of building a "risk fleet".¹⁶ Whereas the Secretary of State had intended to put pressure upon Britain by building a powerful fleet which would be too great a risk to attack, the Admiralty, under Churchill's leadership, had, in 1911/1912, drawn a conclusion from this development which more or less turned Tirpitz's political and naval strategy upside down. "If Britain could hope that it could wear down Germany in a future war without using its fleet, there would not be any risk anymore. Due to this far-reaching decision, the Atlantic Ocean, or at least the entrance into the Atlantic Ocean would be the decisive theatre of the naval war, not the wet triangle in the North Sea as we had expected so far."¹⁷

In the course of his lecture, Assmann painted an interesting picture of German naval strategy before and during World War I; he highlighted Tirpitz's *idée fixe* of a decisive battle which left no room for alternative strategies, the complete lack of cooperation between the political, the military, and the naval leadership, and the "wrong understanding of the classical teachings of the history of naval warfare due to an insufficient understanding

15 On German and British planning for a naval war see Eva Besteck, *Die trügerische "First Line of Defence". Zum deutsch-britischen Wettüsten vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Freiburg: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2006).

16 Kurt Assmann, "Gedanken über die Probleme der deutschen Seekriegführung im Weltkriege", February 1938, in BA-MA RM 8/1121. See also Gemzell, *Organization*, pp. 361–362, and Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea. Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875–1914* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 263, 26, who rightly emphasize the importance of Assmann's ideas.

17 Assmann, "Gedanken...".

of its real principles” as he called it. However, he also pointed out the disadvantages of geography. In peacetime, Assmann argued, Germany’s political leadership should have improved Germany’s geographic position by concluding some kind of agreement with Denmark, an agreement which would even have justified a number of sacrifices. “Denmark”, Assmann admitted, “would not have opened the door into the open Atlantic, but, apart from the key into Baltic, we would at least have possessed two sortie routes into the northern North Sea instead of only one. Moreover, a strong naval base at Skagen would have been of an enormous value in our fight for the door into the Atlantic Ocean.” Perhaps, Assmann argued, Norway could also have been won over by such an alliance policy, and during the war, an occupation of both countries might have extended Germany’s strategic position in the Northern Atlantic.

Indirectly, and this is important to stress, Assmann referred to ideas which had been developed by a young naval officer during the war, but which had been regarded as a kind of heresy by many of his superiors: the ideas of commander Wolfgang Wegener.¹⁸ In several memoranda Wegener had analyzed Germany’s naval strategy and, moreover, Tirpitz’s concept of the importance of a decisive battle as the prerequisite of naval supremacy. As early as 1915, he had accused Tirpitz of building a fleet “without taking into account Germany’s geographical position.” Accordingly, he suggested the occupation of a “position in the Skagerrak” – as he called it – including the Faroes as well as of two ports on the French Atlantic coast. Thus he wanted to get hold of the “handle of the door” into the Atlantic Ocean which meant the occupation of real naval bases, not cruiser bases.

During World War I Wegener’s ideas had been unwelcome, for they had conflicted with more traditional concepts of naval warfare. Moreover, a strategy of sea-denial, which meant unrestricted submarine-warfare, had seemed to promise to be more successful in

the naval war against Britain than a difficult and dangerous assault on Scandinavian countries in order to enlarge Germany’s strategic position. In this context it should also be added that the army had been unable to provide any troops for such an operation – even after the victory against Roumania in late 1916 – not to speak of the inherent problems of a large-scale combined operation.

Wegener’s Heretical Ideas

After 1918, there was neither an army nor a navy which were able to conduct any offensive operations at all. This, however, does not mean that their respective leaderships did not cherish the idea of grasping for world power again. More urgent needs, especially the need to develop a strategy against Poland and France, Germany’s most likely adversaries in a war in the near future, with only a limited number of outdated vessels required the full attention of all members of a rather small navy. Moreover, as long as Germany was governed by democratic parties, there was no room for any aggressive policy.

Nevertheless, even in the interwar period German naval planners were very alive to the weaknesses described above. In spite of Tirpitz’s shadow, which still loomed large over the navy, its officers, not to speak of its historians, discussed possible strategic scenarios and military options. Wolfgang Wegener, the most important war-time naval heretic, who had been promoted to the post of Inspector of the Marine Artillery and appointed Rear Admiral in 1923, again took the opportunity to propagate his ideas by circulating an unpublished and revised version of the memoranda he had written between 1915 and 1917.¹⁹

His *Denkschrift* included three main points:

- Naval strategy during and before World

¹⁸ A collection of his memoranda can be found in his private papers in BA-MA Wegener papers N 607/1-2.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Wegener, *Die Seestrategie des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1929), and, again, now unabridged, in 1941. Wegener’s book was translated by Holger H. Herwig and published by Naval Institute Press: Wolfgang Wegener, *The Naval Strategy of the World War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989). See especially Gemzell, *Raeder...*, pp. 15–25; and by the same author *Organization...*, pp. 266–271.

War I had concentrated too much on the defensive.

- Germany's coastal base must be extended.
- The new navy must be created on the basis of offensive measures and as a result of long-term planning.

In this context he particularly pointed out that the realisation of this strategic objective must not be halted by any considerations of neutrality. Though Wegener was not very precise in the published version of his memoranda, which, of course, had been censored by the *Marineleitung* before, it was clear that Denmark and Norway were his main objectives. Especially the 1000 mile long Norwegian coastline, facing the Atlantic Ocean and opening up the seas of the world had generated his vision of a naval strategy that had been out of reach in the earlier conflict. Protected by the off-shore islands, German submarines could slip in and out of Norwegian ports with impunity and surface raiders could return to refuel and rearm without having to brave the submarine blockade of the North German ports.

However, in 1929, such ideas were not welcome. Raeder, the chief of the *Marineleitung*, was outraged by this pamphlet. At first sight, this reaction seemed fully understandable, because Raeder was one of Tirpitz's most faithful disciples. By publishing his *Denkschrift*, however, Wegener had again severely criticised the "master" of the German navy. A closer look shows, however, that Raeder's reaction was probably motivated by his desire to destroy the impression that the navy was once again secretly making plans for another grasp for world power. Only the year before, in 1928, the *Marineleitung* had had great difficulties in pushing through its demands for a new armoured cruiser. While this demand was motivated by the need to build a vessel which was strong enough to defend German territory against Polish claims, it was clear for every insider that the *Panzerkreuzer*, due to its range, armour, and armament was basically a vessel for cruiser warfare in the Atlantic and not off the coast of East Prussia. In this context Wegener's *Denkschrift* could prove highly detrimental to Raeder's ultimate aims. Nevertheless, Wegener's book as well as the memoranda written by two

naval officers, who later became high-ranking admirals, Förste and Weichold, in 1929, on the "History of case J and its lessons for a naval war in the future" clearly illustrate that the German naval leadership dealt seriously with German strategy towards neutral Scandinavian countries in a future war.²⁰

Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, however, completely changed the foundations of both German foreign policy and naval planning as well as naval building. Though the navy had to restrain itself as well as avoid any conflict with Great Britain for the time being, it was clear that Raeder regarded this change in German domestic and foreign policy as a golden opportunity. "The scale of world importance of a nation corresponds with the scale of its maritime power", he told Hitler in 1934.²¹ These could have been Tirpitz's words, and it is clear what was meant. In the long run, the navy was willing to fight for naval supremacy once gain.

However, for the time being, Raeder knew that it would be suicidal to begin a new race against Great Britain. For such a race, he needed time, and he was quite satisfied when Britain and Germany concluded a naval agreement in 1935. Whereas Raeder and the *Kriegsmarine* needed time for obvious reasons, Hitler increasingly felt that he had no time, especially no time to wait until Great Britain would come, as he – like Tirpitz – said time and again. After 1937 Anglo-German relations quickly deteriorated. What did this mean for naval planning?

As early as 1937, when the Anglo-German agreement seemed to grant some kind of respite in which the fleet could slowly be built up, Raeder had given a detailed account of his ideas on naval power in general and naval strategy in particular in the presence of high-ranking political and military leaders, including Hitler himself, on 3 February 1937.²² He argued for the creation of

20 Copies of these memoranda, dated February respectively March 1929, can be found in BA-MA RM 20/1558.

21 Cited in Michael Salewski, „Das maritime Dritte Reich. Ideologie und Wirklichkeit“, in *Michael Salewski, Die Deutschen und die See. Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Jürgen Elvert and Stefan Lippert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), p. 229.

22 See Gemzell, *Raeder...*, pp. 49–71. Hans-Martin

a naval power based on a strong fleet and on a prominent geographical position. He also demanded a long-term shipbuilding programme. Moreover, he referred to the experiences of World War I and gave a detailed interpretation of them. He criticized German naval warfare during World War I, especially the concentration on one decisive battle. Instead, he argued, in a future war it would be necessary to seek the decision not only in one big operation but in numerous operations within an offensive framework. Though Raeder proved a true disciple of Tirpitz in many ways in this long speech, there can be no doubt that he had also taken up some of Wegener's ideas, for example when he referred to the latter's demand for base expansion.

While it was unnecessary to draw immediate consequences in early 1937, the political and, thus also the military, situation changed within months. Sooner than expected the navy had to draw up war plans against the Royal Navy. In a speech in which he commented on the navy's war games in the winter of 1937/38, Raeder took the opportunity of making a more general statement in the presence of the members of the *Seekriegsleitung*. He declared that every analysis of the war games must come to the demand for a change in Germany's initial strategic position. Thus it was obvious that naval warfare against Russia would be greatly facilitated if a base was available on the Åland Islands in the Baltic. "From the same line of thought", he continued, "one can follow the ideas of Admiral Wegener, and for the carrying out of naval warfare demand first of all the occupation of Denmark and Norway."²³ It is true that in the course of his speech Raeder warned against wishful thinking and against demands that, "even if they corresponded to the needs of naval warfare, were not adapted to the total political and military situation."

What is important here is the fact that, as Gemzell has already rightly argued, "the war game and Raeder's speech show that there was a strong demand from within the navy for a large-scale base expansion."²⁴ The so-called "Planning Committee", established in 1938 to outline the strategy against Great Britain, also dealt with this question of base expansion. Eventually it came to the conclusion that any expansion would have only tactical but no strategic advantages as long as Britain was able to control the line between Scotland, the Shetlands and Bergen. New war games also discussed the idea of occupying Denmark and Norway. However, without a powerful fleet, which needed years to build, all planning seemed somewhat useless as long as this fleet existed only on paper and as long as the army and the air force were not involved in this strategic expansion programme.

A Pre-emptive Strike?

The time to expand Germany's continental basis, however, arrived sooner than expected by the navy. According to Raeder's well-known statement of 3 September 1939, all the *Kriegsmarine* could do in this untimely war due to its limited strength was to fight bravely and to show that it could die honestly.²⁵ Accordingly, German raiders and submarines conducted cruiser warfare in the Atlantic, but they were unable to achieve strategic aims. All the navy could do was to intensify submarine warfare. It was in this context that Raeder first mentioned the acquisition of a base in Norway or in Murmansk. A week later, during an internal meeting, this question was discussed again. "It is necessary", Raeder told his officers, "to examine the question, if there was a possibility of acquiring a base in Norway through Russian and German pressure in order to principally improve our strategic and operational position."²⁶

At first sight, this argument seemed understandable. Why? "As early as the beginning of October, 1939, intelligence reached the Naval Staff that plans were being considered in England to operate against Norway", Vice-

Ottmer, „Weserübung“. Der deutsche Angriff auf Dänemark und Norwegen im April 1940" (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994), rightly emphasizes the importance of Raeder's speech as well as the concurrence of Wegener's and Raeder's ideas. See, however, Michael Salewski, „Das Wesentliche von 'Weserübung'", in Michael Salewski, *Die Deutschen und die See. Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Jürgen Elvert and Stefan Lippert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), pp. 264–265, who – unjustly – denies that Raeder was directly or indirectly influenced by Wegener.

23 Cited in Gemzell, *Raeder...*, p. 281.

24 Ibid.

25 See Michael Salewski, *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935–1945*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1970–75), p. 91.

26 Cited in Ottmer, „Weserübung“..., p. 20.

Admiral Assmann wrote in 1957.²⁷ This was nothing but a reiteration of a statement he had made in a memorandum he had written almost ten years earlier for the Admiralty in London: "It was absolutely essential to prevent England from occupying Norway; since this would have brought Sweden also under English influence, and would have seriously endangered German sea communications in the Baltic. It would have interrupted the supply of Swedish ore to Germany, and would have allowed England to intensify her air war on Germany. The maintenance of German naval supremacy in the Baltic and the continued supply of Swedish ore were both vital to Germany's conduct of the war. The Naval Staff considered that the loss of Norway to England would be synonymous with losing the war."

Moreover, would a pre-emptive strike to extend Germany's naval bases, even if this meant the violation of the neutrality of Scandinavian states, not be a genuine lesson taught by history from a naval point of view? The Allies had done so in 1918 when they had forced the Norwegians to support the completion of a mine barrier consisting of more than 70,000 mines between Scotland and Norway. Whilst this chain had not been as successful as had been hoped because some of the mines proved defective, there was no justification for believing that it would not be technically possible to complete a very formidable barrier in a future war against Britain.

There was also the iron ore. Whilst the iron ore carriers were secure within the protection of the territorial waters inside the Leads, at least as long as the Allies respected this legal restraint, they would become easy prey for submarines and surface raiders if forced by mining into the open Norwegian sea. Other valuable imports also came into Germany from Sweden's industrial base, and Scandinavia was economically more important to Germany than to the Allies. So even though a strict interpretation of neutrality by the Scandinavian countries might have suited the German interests, at least in the early phase of the war when their forces were stretched, the British interest lay in interfering with Norwegian neutrality to the detriment of

German trade and long term naval strategy. We have seen of course that such thoughts were being voiced within the Admiralty and elsewhere even before the war started.

Of even greater concern than a nominally neutral Norway under the influence of Great Britain would be one actually occupied by the Allies. If the RAF could operate from airfields in Norway and the Royal Navy from ports in the Skagerrak, the Baltic Sea would become a British lake and the inferior German Navy would be systematically destroyed. Furthermore, British bombers would also dominate the industrial areas of northern Germany. A British occupied Norway would be a strategic disaster for Germany and must be avoided at all costs. The German Navy at least was well aware of this threat establishing a presence ashore to thwart the export of iron ore to Germany.

These arguments, did, of course play a role, but it is astonishing that Raeder did not even mention them. It was Germany's strategic position that had to be improved, not Germany's iron ore trade that had to be protected against British attacks. We all know what happened in the weeks and months which followed these deliberations about the feasibility or even the need of an attack on Norway.²⁸

This leads us to the final question: why did Raeder not only plead for but, in fact, demand the planning and execution of *Weserübung*? Four reasons, which are somewhat interrelated, may give an answer to this question:²⁹

1. Firstly and secondly, both from a tactical and from a strategic point of view, *Weserübung* seemed inevitable in a narrower as well as in a broader sense. Tactically, Norway was the only base from which the *Kriegsmarine* could successfully conduct operations against Britain, if it did not want to repeat the *Kleinkrieg* of World War I, which had rendered no results.

2. Thirdly, these tactical needs corresponded with Raeder's conception that the navy, unlike 1914–18, should cut, if possible, Britain's lines of communication in the Atlan-

28 For a detailed account see Ottmer, „*Weserübung*“, pp. 31–132.

29 See also Salewski, „Das Wesentliche von *Weserübung*“, pp. 262–269.

27 Cited in Gemzell, *Raeder...*, p. 327.

tic. This aim, however, was directly and indirectly the result of the navy's historical experiences during World War I. Deeply interested in naval history, Raeder was only too well aware of them and he had closely followed the debate on different strategies in the past. Even though we may never know to what extent Raeder was in fact influenced by Wegener's ideas, there can be no doubt that they had the function of a catalyst in preparing *Weserübung*. As long as Raeder had hoped that Britain might come, he had refused to even discuss them, always bearing in mind that such a discussion might be detrimental both to his political aims as well as to the unity of the naval officer corps. In this respect, Raeder was a true disciple of Tirpitz: he was afraid of the consequences of an open debate about naval strategy which inevitably would have disastrous effects on both Great Britain and neutral countries. In late 1939, these obstacles did not exist anymore. On the contrary, Raeder now began to realize that the navy – firstly – needed a success which would strengthen its position within the political and military hierarchy of the Third Reich – the historical analogy to 1914–1918 lies at hand.

Besides, he knew that base expansion would greatly enhance the navy's capabilities in the naval war against Great Britain. At this time, only Norway and not the French Atlantic Coast as some naval planners thought was able to provide the key to the door into the Atlantic. However, though this conclusion seemed compelling, it did not take into account one important aspect: such an operation might extend the navy's bases, but at the cost of its fleet, without which, as Wegener had argued, it was impossible to exert sea-power. Instead, the base would turn into a burden, which would be felt more heavily every day.

3. In a broader strategic sense, *Weserübung* seemed necessary in order to prepare the continental glacis for a future fight against the Soviet Union – that is probably one of the reasons why Hitler, who never fully understood the navy's strategic problems, eventually approved Raeder's demands.

4. *Weserübung* also neatly fitted in into the Nazi ideology of a Europe dominated by the "Germanic race". High ranking naval officers seem to have shared this vision; the "confessions" of Admiral Boehm are a striking example of the degree to which members of the *Kriegsmarine* shared the ideas of "Volk, Raum und Rasse".³⁰

Conclusion

To sum up: From the navy's point of view, in spite of its heavy losses during *Weserübung*, the wheel seemed to have come full circle in the summer of 1940. In the preface of the completely revised edition of the first volume of *The War at Sea, 1914–1918*,³¹ Admiral Assmann was proud to write that the hope expressed in the first edition which had been published in 1920 had come true: Germany was again a powerful state on the continent and it seemed to have the resources to defend its status whatever might happen in the future. The navy, he proudly added, this time had greatly contributed to this development.

Only five years later, none of those who had been responsible at this time was willing to accept responsibility any more. Moreover, no one was willing to admit that the navy had pursued a policy, which not only once but twice had contributed to the outbreak of a World War. It was only several decades later that a new generation of naval historians began to tell the real story of *Weserübung* thus paving the way for a better understanding of the past and helping to learn lessons which were to prove important for the future.

30 See Boehm's memorandum on „Die politische Entwicklung in Norwegen in der Zeit seit der Besetzung 1940 bis zum Frühjahr 1943“, in: BA-MA RM 6/89

31 Copy in BA-MA RM 8/208-209.

Archival sources

Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BA-MA)

N 607/1-2.

RM 5/904, 905, 906, 1639.

RM 6/ 89, 91.

RM 8/208-209, 1121.

RM 4948-4950.

Otto-von-Bismarck-Stiftung, Friedrichsruh

B 130.

Bibliography

- Besteck, Eva: *Die trügerische "First Line of Defence". Zum deutsch-britischen Wettüsten vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Freiburg: Rombach Druck- und Verlagshaus, 2006).
- Duppler, Jörg: *Germania auf dem Meere. Bilder und Dokumente zur deutschen Marinegeschichte* (Hamburg: Mittler, 1998).
- Epkenhans, Michael: „'Clio' und die Marine“, in *Deutsche Marinen im Wandel. Vom Symbol nationaler Einheit zum Instrument internationaler Sicherheit*, ed. Werner Rahn (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005).
- Gemzell, Carl-Alexander: *Organization, Conflict, and Innovation. A Study of German Naval Strategic Planning 1888–1940* (Lund: Esselte studium, 1973).
- Gemzell, Carl-Alexander: *Raeder, Hitler und Skandinavien. Der Kampf für einen maritimen Operationsplan* (Lund: Gleerup, 1965).
- Hillmann, Jörg: „Die Kriegsmarine und ihre Großadmirale. Die Haltbarkeit von Bildern der Kriegsmarine“, in *Militärische Erinnerungskultur. Soldaten im Spiegel von Biographien, Memoiren und Selbstzeugnissen*, eds. Michael Epkenhans, Stig Förster and Karen Hagemann (Paderborn: Schöningh Paderborn, 2006).
- Hobson, Rolf: *Imperialism at Sea. Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875–1914* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002).
- Hubatsch, Walther: „*Weserübung*“. *Die deutsche Besetzung von Dänemark und Norwegen 1940*, 2nd revised edition (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1960).
- Marinerundschau*, vol. 50 (1953).
- Lambi, Ivo N.: *The Navy and German Power Politics, 1862–1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1984).
- Ottmer, Hans-Martin: „*Weserübung*“. *Der deutsche Angriff auf Dänemark und Norwegen im April 1940* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994).
- Salewski, Michael: „Das maritime Dritte Reich. Ideologie und Wirklichkeit“, in *Michael Salewski, Die Deutschen und die See. Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Jürgen Elvert and Stefan Lippert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998).
- Salewski, Michael: „Das Wesentliche von 'Weserübung'“, in *Michael Salewski, Die Deutschen und die See. Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Jürgen Elvert and Stefan Lippert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998).
- Salewski, Michael: *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935–1945*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1970–75).
- Salewski, Michael, „'Weserübung 1905'? Dänemark im strategischen Kalkül Deutschlands vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg“, in *Michael Salewski, Die Deutschen und die See. Studien zur deutschen Marinegeschichte des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, eds. Jürgen Elvert and Stefan Lippert (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), pp. 138–151.
- „Skandinavien och Tyskland. 1800–1914“, ed. Deutsche Historische Museum (Berlin, 1998).
- Wegener, Wolfgang: *Die Seestrategie des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler & Sohn, 1929).
- Wegener, Wolfgang: *The Naval Strategy of the World War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989).