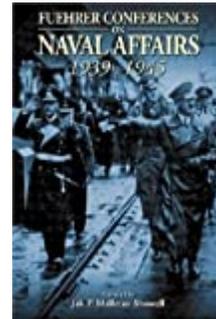




Jak P. Mallmann Showell. *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945.* London: Chatham Publishing, 2005. 496 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86176-255-9.



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Old Wine in a New Bottle

On September 3, 1939, following the declaration of war on Germany by Great Britain that signaled the start of a second global conflict within a quarter-century, a depressed Grand Admiral Dr. Erich Raeder, Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy since 1928, wrote a memorandum in which he personally assessed the strategic situation of his command. In this memo he wrote portentous words that were later to come true with startling accuracy: "The surface forces ... are so inferior in number and strength to those of the British Fleet that, even at full strength, they can do no more than show that they know how to die gallantly" (p. 38).[1]

Raeder's somber mood was due to his conviction that the outbreak of war and the onset of hostilities with the British Royal Navy, the world's premier naval force, meant the certain destruction of the small but efficient German Navy. Germany was not prepared in 1939 to fight a full-scale war at sea, and Raeder was stunned and somewhat bitter at the unexpected turn of events. The German invasion of Poland and outbreak of war had shocked him. Hitler had repeatedly assured him the fleet would not need to be fully combat ready for several more

years. German naval strategy and the associated operational planning and force structure calculations had been based on a war with the British Empire beginning no earlier than 1944/45. German sea power in September 1939 was a growing and modern but still incoherent collection of surface ships and submarines of varying capabilities ill suited to tackling the large and balanced Royal Navy.

Raeder possessed a keen strategic mind and was a true military professional in every sense of the word. He had served as Chief of Staff to Hipper, Commander of the Scouting Forces, in World War I, and had earned a doctorate in political science in the 1920s. Raeder's pessimistic outlook on the future was justified, for he realized that the possibility of a favorable outcome in a contest with the Royal Navy was for the German Navy nothing more than sheer fantasy. Nonetheless, his grim analysis did not mean that the fatally outmatched German Navy was "resigned to the inevitable, or unwilling to accept the challenge".[2] After forty-five years of naval service, Raeder fatalistically saw it as his job to ensure that the German Navy, in the course of carrying out its role in support of government policy, sold itself dearly and

inflicted as much damage to the enemy's forces and resources as possible before expiring.

Raeder's shocked reaction at the Anglo-French declaration of war clearly indicated that he had been deceived by Hitler's soothing assurances. Right up to the time of the British declaration of war, Hitler had emphasized to him that the ultimate goal of German foreign policy was the creation of an understanding with England. In the weeks leading up to the war, with the international political situation worsening, Raeder had warned Hitler of the risk of antagonizing Britain and tried to educate him about the full potential of British naval and economic power. The events of September 3, 1939, starkly revealed the frustrating breakdown of his attempts. Raeder was sobered by his failure to sway Hitler and to influence events. His trust and faith in Hitler's judgment were also shaken.

When Raeder met with Hitler at Führer Headquarters on September 7, 1939, for their first wartime conference on the developing naval situation, Raeder quietly began a precedent—he started a surreptitious process of documenting all topics discussed and all decisions made. These "Situation Reports" (*Lageberichte*) were drawn up after the meetings had been concluded, and were based for the most part on handwritten notes and personal memories of the senior naval representative. Since secretaries were not present at the presentations to Hitler on naval affairs,[3] these reports can not be considered verbatim transcripts but rather synopses of the conference discussions, usually dictated by Raeder (and later by his replacement Großadmiral Karl Dönitz) or his respective stand-in. Raeder and Dönitz made it their habit to study the final typescript version of the reports carefully and edit as necessary to ensure accuracy prior to signing and filing these documents.

What is interesting is that Raeder, who is considered by many historians to have been politically naïve, showed keen political insight in this move. Nazi Germany was a snake-pit of political infighting, and Raeder's move to document exactly what he told Hitler and which orders and operational directives he had been given in return was sagacious. The reports were not official minutes (*Protokolle*), as copies were not circulated to all participants, but rather retained for exclusive use of the naval leadership. They were more in the nature of proprietary memoranda for the record. The situation reports were kept in the archives of the Naval High Command (Oberkommando der Marine). In the event of a dispute, they could be pulled out as needed and referenced to jus-

tify orders and policies, or used as leverage in disagreements between service rivals. When Raeder resigned his position in January 1943, Dönitz seamlessly continued the practice of generating situation reports after every meeting with Hitler.

This is a paperback reissue of the hardcover book of the same title published in 1990 by the Naval Institute Press. Both versions contain an introduction by Jak P. Mallman Showell, a renowned naval historian author of many well-regarded studies on the German Navy. This book is not a standard narrative history of the navy at war. Rather, it provides a chronological compilation of select German Navy documents (primarily Raeder's and Dönitz's situation reports, but also including campaign directives, operational orders, war diaries, telegrams, letters and copies of radio messages) accompanied by notes and commentary paragraphs intended to help the reader understand the documents in their proper historical context.

The documents are a small selection of the papers taken from the massive collection of over 60,000 German naval records captured by the advancing American armies in Bavaria in 1945. Although Hitler had ordered the destruction of all government papers in the closing months of the war, Dönitz ignored this instruction and directed the preservation of the bulk of the Kriegsmarine's most critical documents. According to Mallmann Showell, Dönitz took this action because he felt that the German Navy had conducted an honorable and fair war and therefore had nothing to hide from the victors. What Mallmann Showell does not indicate is whether he believes this judgment was altruistic (to provide historians with accurate original documentation on the naval war waged by Germany) or defensive (out of the need to provide legal justification for decisions and commands made by German Navy leaders during the course of the conflict).

The story of the original documents that fell into Allied hands and constitute this book is a fascinating one. The vast repository of German naval records was captured at the end of the war by Allied forces in Schloß Tambach, near Coburg, where they had been hidden for safekeeping. They were then translated by a team from the Royal Navy led by a Commander Saunders RN, prior to being sorted, collated and classified by Anthony Martienssen, the Press Officer in the British Admiralty. Martienssen, a student at Cambridge University when the war began in 1939, was a seasoned combat veteran by 1945—he had been commissioned an officer in the

Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve early in the war, and had seen extensive action, starting in 1940, in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, Arctic and Pacific theaters.

The set of compiled booklets that resulted from Martienssen's labors were first circulated shortly after the war by the Admiralty in a series of typescript volumes published by H.M. Stationery Office. Not long afterwards, a separate multi-volume set was issued by the U.S. Navy's Office of Naval Intelligence and printed by the U.S. Government Printing Office.[4] The basis for *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs 1939-1945* is a smaller, select collection of translated documents chosen by Martienssen for publication in *Brassey's Naval Annual* in 1948.[5] As Mallman Showell points out, these captured Kriegsmarine documents were largely forgotten for over two decades, until a German historian and former senior Kriegsmarine officer, Gerhard Wagner, republished them in 1972 in a German-language version.[6] Interestingly, Wagner's book is based on Martienssen's English translations of the Kriegsmarine records in *Brassey's Naval Annual*, because German writers at this time still did not have direct access to the original wartime documents. It is Martienssen's immediate postwar editing work and 1948 extracts that one views while thumbing through both the paperback Chatham Publishing and hardcover Naval Institute Press versions of this book. The fascinating tale of how these documents came to print is detailed in the introduction of the present volume and in Martienssen's postwar book *Hitler and His Admirals*. [7]

The great bulk of book's contents is comprised of the situation reports. It is in no way a complete and comprehensive study of the Kriegsmarine's role in the war at sea, and as such can not be considered an "official history" similar to Captain Steven Roskill's masterful study of the Royal Navy in World War II.[8] This book does not easily lend itself to reading from cover to cover, but rather is most useful as a handy reference book for anyone interested in gaining an understanding the German conduct of World War II at sea. While the documents selected cover the conduct of the major campaigns and include the most important conferences between Hitler and his senior Kriegsmarine leaders, one should keep in mind that they are only a small selection of the total cache of German naval documents captured in the waning days of the war.

The greatest value of the book is the excellent overview one gains of German grand strategy in World War II in general, and into Kriegsmarine strategy and tactics in the course of its various campaigns in the At-

lantic, North Sea, Baltic, Arctic and Mediterranean theaters. The book provides a unique perspective into the German conduct of the war, as the documents reveal that the topic of the discussions between Hitler and his naval chiefs ranged from high-level, sensitive matters such as diplomatic relations with the occupied European countries regarding the use of overseas bases for German naval forces, to banal questions dealing with the tactical employment and emplacement of naval mines in British coastal waters. It is quite startling to realize the breadth of decisions and requests for inputs requested on a continual basis of Hitler by his senior military leaders.

The book's greatest weaknesses are the hopelessly outdated explanatory notes found throughout the book, the inaccuracy and poor quality of the German-English translation, the old-fashioned layout and the lack of an index. The point to remember is that this is an exact, facsimile copy of a 1948 book produced immediately after the war when an in-depth knowledge of the Kriegsmarine's operational methods, terminology and equipment was lacking among the Allies. As a result, the book suffers from improper usage (such as frequent and jarring invocation of the term "pocket battleship" in the various documents, a particular idiom not found in German naval parlance) and numerous inexcusable typographical errors (for example, calling the pocket battleship the "Duetschland"). The glossary has many errors and glaringly reveals that German naval organization and many expressions and technical terms were unfamiliar to the translators. The lack of an index makes it nearly impossible to find specific information.

It was disappointing that the 2005 edition was not updated in any way from the hardcover version of the book printed fifteen years earlier, let alone that published in 1948. The foreword is exactly the same as the 1990 edition without any modification. The old-fashioned fonts and the complicated layout and organization give the book a distinctly dated look. Given the knowledge we now have of the influence of secret intelligence (such as Enigma) on naval operations and the tremendous impact of Allied code-breaking on the outcome of the war, the failure to update the notes and commentary with up-to-date scholarship severely limits the usefulness of this work for any audience other than general readership. The level of analysis available in 1948 is inadequate for today's needs, given the advances in our current understanding of the German war effort. Sixty years have passed since these papers were captured by the Allies, and it has been fifty-seven years since they were published and made available to English-speaking audiences. It is high time that

the notes, limited as they were to information available at the time, be brought up to date. Regrettably, this book does not accomplish that task.

This volume provides affordable access in a single volume to certain papers on the German side of the naval conflict in World War II not otherwise readily available to most people. For serious researchers and students seeking a more comprehensive collection of original documentation of the German Navy's experiences in World War II, however, nothing surpasses Werner Rahn and Gerhard Schreiber's *Kriegstagebuch der Seekriegsleitung 1939-1945*, a monumental, 76-volume compilation of Kriegsmarine documents.[9] The prominent German military historian Michael Salewski authored an excellent three-volume analytical study of German naval leadership, *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935-1945*, that is still considered the standard work on the subject.[10]

Notes

[1]. For an excellent account of the German Navy's combat performance, see Vincent P. O'Hara, *The German Fleet at War 1939-1945* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004).

[2]. Erich Raeder, *My Life* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1960), p. 281.

[3]. Following the leadership crisis in the German High Command that occurred in the late summer of 1942, Hitler subsequently ordered that every word spoken at his twice-daily situation briefings be recorded stenographically in the form of an official transcript.

Portions of these minutes have been published in Helmut Heiber and David M. Glantz, *Hitler and His Generals: Military Conferences, 1942-1945* (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), originally published in German as *Hitlers Lagebesprechungen. Die Protokollfragmente seiner militärischen Konferenzen 1942-1945* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962).

[4]. *Fuehrer Conferences on Matters Dealing with the German Navy*, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947).

[5]. *Fuehrer Conferences on Naval Affairs* (Brassey's Naval Annual_ (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1948).

[6]. Gerhard Wagner, ed., *Lagevorträge des Oberbefehlshabers der Kriegsmarine vor Hitler 1939 1945* (Munich: J.F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1972).

[7]. Anthony Martiensen, *Hitler and His Admirals* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1948), pp. xiii-xv.

[8]. Steven Roskill, *The War at Sea*, 3 vols. (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1954-1961).

[9]. Werner Rahn and Gerhard Schreiber, eds., *Kriegstagebuch der Seekriegsleitung 1939-1945*, im Auftrag des Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamtes in Verbindung mit dem Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv und der Marine-Offiziers-Vereinigung, 76 vols. (Herford: Mittler, 1988).

[10]. Michael Salewski, *Die deutsche Seekriegsleitung 1935-1945*, 3 vols. (Munich: Bernard and Graefe, 1970-1975).

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