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Howard D. Grier. *Hitler, Donitz and the Baltic Sea: The Third Reich's Last Hope, 1944-1945.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007. xxii + 287 pp. 434.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59114-345-1.

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Explaining Hitler's Behavior on the Eastern Front: The Naval Perspective

One of the more perplexing aspects of the war on the Eastern Front was Adolf Hitler's propensity to withhold permission for withdrawals beyond the moment when they had become necessary, even if combat units were facing imminent encirclement and annihilation. Repeatedly, large German formations found themselves cut off, surrounded, and without hope of relief. Countless battles large and small and countless units from the smallest battle groups to entire armies experienced such hopeless situations. It also happened to Army Group North, whose primary mission throughout the war was to capture Leningrad. During the summer of 1944, the successful conclusion of the Soviet summer offensive against Army Group Center presented the Red Army with an opportunity to destroy Army Group North through envelopment from its southern flank. The resulting battle, the battle for Courland, saw the army group cut off from the main German forces and forbidden from either breaking out or withdrawing to the west. The Soviets knew the isolated German army group could make no further contribution to the war and, after creating a more or less effective seal, left the pocket unmolested until the final German surrender in May 1945. The obvious question then and now is why Hitler deprived himself of hundreds of thousands of men and large amounts of equipment at such a critical stage of the war. The usual explanation is that Hitler simply refused to let any units, regardless of their size or the imminence of the disaster facing them, withdraw from their positions. Even when it became apparent that the Soviets intended to isolate Army Group North, Hitler stuck to this policy and the formation was irretrievably lost. This obstinate refusal to save one of the least decimated of the German armies has been taken to indicate that Hitler had no real strategy for winning the war, only an ultimately fatal policy of delay whose main components were the transfer of units from less threatened sectors to crisis areas and a refusal to permit withdrawals. Hitler, in other words, simply stumbled from one crisis to another without a coherent strategy, and Courland is a key example that proves this assertion.

This book readdresses the question of Hitler's strategy in the East by examining the relevance of naval issues to the conduct of strategy on the northern sector of the Eastern Front. Its simple yet disturbing premise: the conduct of the war in the East, specifically the policy

on withdrawals, was conditioned after 1944 by Hitler's desire to prolong the war until the arrival of "wonder weapons" could bring final victory. In this case, the much-anticipated weapons were submarines of a radically new design believed capable of escaping detection by Allied navies and aircraft. They would allow the German navy to resume the failed submarine war of 1943; anticipated losses of shipping and equipment to the Allies would starve both the British and American armies into a negotiated peace, whereupon Germany would focus all of its energies upon the war in the East.

Seen in this light, the policy of forbidding withdrawals thus had two bases. In order to create the conditions for successful attacks after Britain and the United States had exited the war, bypassed German units were to remain in place so that they could serve as springboards for counter-attacks into the Soviet rear. Secondly, some isolated pockets of the Eastern Front were important to protect access to the Baltic Sea, the location of the training areas for submarine crews. The retention of this territory would be a vital element of any successfully resumed submarine combat. As the Red Army pushed the German army out of eastern Europe, the Germans lost losing control of this vital area, which risked the failure of any submarine initiative for lack of trained crews. The author thus argues that Hitler chose not to evacuate isolated German bridgeheads along the Baltic Sea because of his concerns about the war in the Atlantic, and that Karl DÃ¶nitz, head of the German navy since 1943, played a large role in formulating this policy.

Much of the book is occupied with an operational history of the Eastern Front from early 1944 through the end of the war. It begins with the lifting of the siege of Leningrad and the German withdrawal to the Narva line, where it remained until after the Soviet summer offensives of 1944. Howard D. Grier makes the case that as the Germans withdrew, DÃ¶nitz persuaded Hitler to protect German control of the Baltic sea, which was not merely the only deep water suitable for submarine training, but also the route for vital deliveries of Swedish iron ore and Estonian shale oil. DÃ¶nitz was convinced that the German inability to control the Baltic would entice the Red Navy, which had been bottled up throughout the war, to make it impossible for the German navy to operate there.

Grier makes a convincing, albeit circumstantial, case that Hitler accommodated DÃ¶nitz by permitting units to remain behind in coastal areas even as the rest of the German forces withdrew. Even in January 1945, as the Red Army stood on the Oder River, DÃ¶nitz claimed that the loss of the Bay of Danzig would cripple the (nonexistent) submarine war. Without the bay, crews could not be trained and submarines could not be launched. This conclusion would seem reasonable but for one major problem: in January, none of the new "wonder weapons" existed. Submarines types XXI and XXIII were truly revolutionary designs but had proved difficult to manufacture. Production problems prevented their delivery and, despite promises to the contrary, the earliest DÃ¶nitz could count on launching his fleet was April 1945. But by then, the Red Army was approaching quickly from the East and the British and Americans were advancing from the West. Even had the "wonder weapons" been launched in April, when only two were ready (neither of which ever fired a single torpedo), they would have been far too late to have made even a minor impact.

What makes Grier's thesis disturbing is its incorporation of the delay in launching the U-Boat war. Grier makes an excellent case for linking the war in the East to German naval policy, but his explanation boggles the mind. If we accept his argument, we must conclude that DÃ¶nitz, who knew full well that no boats would be available before the summer or fall of 1945, convinced Hitler to adopt a strategy that German soldiers paid for with their lives in exchange for the remote possibility that a few U-Boats might be able to train in adjacent waters for the resumption of a battle already lost once at a time when enemy forces would be occupying most of Germany.

If Grier is right, then DÃ¶nitz was as devoid of strategic thinking as Hitler. It was not DÃ¶nitz's job to convince Hitler to sacrifice army units in order to hold onto every single naval asset regardless of cost, but rather to assess realistically the value of the Baltic for training U-Boat crews. For DÃ¶nitz to persuade Hitler to maintain a presence in the Courland so that crews for the Type XXI and XIII could be trained, he would have had to have been convinced that submarines had a strong chance of winning the war in the Atlantic. But, as DÃ¶nitz well knew, few of these submarines stood a chance of being operational before Germany faced ultimate collapse; in a best case scenario, virtually none of them would have been able to fire upon Allied shipping.

If DÃ¶nitz actually thought a handful of submarines could sink so many Allied ships that the western Allies would drop out of the war as a result, he was even more delusional than Hitler. The Type XXI and XXIII submarines join the Me-262 jet fighter, the V-1 and V-2 rockets, and a host of other "wonder weapons" upon

which Hitler placed so many foolish hopes as examples of strategy devoid of a realistic assessment of military possibilities. Of these many apparitions, however, the submarines are the most shocking example on which to hang an argument, because they were never operational. If we believe Grier, DÃ¶nitz asked Hitler to expend the lives of thousands of men on a task he knew, or should have known, would not produce the desired result. If this narrative is correct, then DÃ¶nitz ranks as one of the most incompetent military commanders of the entire war.