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JAPAN AND GERMANY—WHY SEA POWER FAILED

A lecture delivered
at the Naval War College
on 15 and 17 January 1964

by

Commander John D. Langford, U.S. Navy

This will be the tenth lecture in the series on 'The Fundamentals of Warfare and Maritime Strategy.' The series began, as you recall, with the study of the thoughts of such famous military theorists as Clausewitz, Douhet, and Mahan. After that, the series concentrated on the historical development of the concepts and weapons of sea power, including the recent lecture on the sea power challenge presented by the Soviet Union. Today the series takes a slightly different turn as we examine how previously discussed theories and concepts were either applied or ignored in the naval strategies of Germany and Japan, who suffered total defeat in World War II. It is, in a sense, a study of naval failure. I would like to say at this time, though, that I will be deeply grateful to those who refrain from commenting that my performance up here is in keeping with the subject.

Before launching into the discussion for this morning, let me say a few more words about the nature of the subject and the manner in which it will be approached. This examination of naval powers in defeat can be, I believe, a very rewarding experience. The old saying, 'Defeat cries out for a solution but victory covers up a multitude of sins' is a very true one. The end result is that the records of the losing side are a good deal more complete and factual than those of the winning side. In addition to using the records thus available, I have sifted through the comments and writings of the observant men associated with events of particular significance. Observant men, incidentally, are a special breed to whom we are indebted for perhaps a little more exact meaning of history. Searching around for a definition, the best I could come up with was that an observant man is one who would have noticed that Lady Godiva was riding a horse—sidesaddle.

As a method of analysis, I have leaned heavily on the military planning process for many reasons. First of all, the subject lends

itself naturally to such an analysis. Also, the Command and Staff students will soon be using the process in their operational problem studies. Finally, if the going gets rough, I can always take refuge in the thought that the United States armed forces, using this method of planning, have never lost a war, while the politicians, professors, and diplomats, using a method that often eludes me, have yet to win a peace.

Beginning with Germany, and applying the principles of Mahan, Germany is found to be missing most of the necessary elements of a major sea power. Her geographical position requires that she maintain land forces to defend against attack from more than one side. Most of her seacoast is on the Baltic, with restricted access to the high seas. A lack of overseas bases has also been a limiting factor. The combination of restricted access to the high seas and the lack of overseas bases has seriously reduced the contribution that the German merchant marine could have made to that nation's sea power. In both of the great wars, the German merchant marine was of considerable size at the outset. In 1939, Germany had the fifth largest merchant marine in the world—totaling 2400 ships and 5 million tons—more than either France or Italy. But when war came, most of the German merchant ships caught on the high seas were either sunk or interned. Those few that made it back to the Baltic, together with those that were there to begin with, were used to transport ore and other materials between Germany and Scandinavia, but they were virtually excluded from the high seas for the entire war. Yet, in spite of these handicaps, Germany has twice engaged in wars that required a maximum effort of the two greatest sea powers of the world to defeat her. There is even a possibility that had she adopted a different naval strategy in these two wars, Germany could have been victorious.

In World War I, the world was unaware of the significance of the submarine as a commerce raider and the Allies were at a complete loss as to how to cope with the submarine until more than two years of war had passed. If Germany had accepted difficulty with neutrals (who were not too neutral anyhow) and the likelihood that the United States would enter the war, she could have begun unrestricted submarine warfare in the initial stages and conducted the submarine campaign with even more daring than she did. The course she did take, with a late decision to employ her submarines to the fullest, took a terrific toll of British shipping, particularly around the British Isles.

Another possibility was for Germany to have made her naval strategy more complementary to the strategy for the war on the continent. Germany began World War I with her land and sea strategies almost diametrically opposed. The Army was committed to a bold and daring offensive plan which aimed at defeating the French armies and the British Expeditionary Forces in a few weeks. The Navy, on the other hand, was kept in a defensive posture, playing the game of a fleet in being. If the German Navy had been used to constantly threaten the English Channel during the early phase of the war, and to make occasional thrusts at the English coast, there is a good possibility that they could have reduced or retarded the flow of troops and supplies to France enough to have made the difference between victory and defeat on land. As it turned out, the German Army lost its great gamble by a narrow margin. After the offensive bogged down in the trenches, a German general gave the forerunner of General MacArthur's famous words, 'There is no substitute for victory.' Explaining the situation to the Kaiser, he said, 'The reason we are not winning is that we are losing.'

Digressing from high strategy for a moment, students of Clausewitz will also appreciate another factor in the naval activities of World War I. That is in reference to what Clausewitz calls the Friction of War—the unplanned-for occurrences, the setbacks that are not anticipated, the many exasperations of combat. When the British attempted to isolate and attack the German destroyers off the Heligoland Bight they were steaming into a countertrap that had been set by the Germans. The British compounded the felony by putting three separate elements of their force into the area, one not knowing of the others' presence. This developed such confusion on the flag bridge of Commodore Goodenough that I dread to think what must have been going on down in the engine room. Later, when Admiral Scheer planned for the Battle of Jutland, he planned on meeting the British in waters where he could maintain a large number of his submarines in their path; airships were to provide reconnaissance; and he relied heavily on the outcome of a night destroyer attack, for which his forces were much better trained than the British. When the battle came, it had been delayed until after his submarines had left the area; weather made the airships useless; the night destroyer attack never took place; and Scheer was forced to hack his way through the British destroyer flotilla in order to get the remnants of his fleet back home. These two battles must have convinced both the British and German naval officers that the coefficient of friction in the North Sea is rather high.

Going back to the outcome of World War I, the extent of Germany's defeat convinced the German Navy that war against Great Britain was a tragic mistake that must never be repeated. So firm was this conviction that an order was issued which forbade consideration of such a war, even in war games. So it was under the Weimar Republic, and under Hitler until 1938, that Germany planned, built, and trained her Navy not as a specially designed force to defeat the English at sea, but as a balanced fleet which would be a welcome contribution to any alliance that Germany might enter.

At this point let's take a look at the two men who were to decide German naval strategy in the course of World War II. First, Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, who had been Commander in Chief of the German Navy since 1928, and would continue in that post until 1943. Admiral Raeder was an intense student of military history and naval strategy. His two-volume treatise on cruiser warfare had become the standard work on that subject. His books and writings reveal an ardent admiration for our own Admiral Mahan. He was also extremely loyal to his Chancellor, who is the second man we should consider.

Adolf Hitler had little knowledge of sea power, but from 1939 on would exercise absolute control of the German Navy. It has often been said that the course of events that led to World War II could have been foretold by anyone who had taken his *Mein Kampf* seriously. By the same token, the outcome of naval operations against England could also have been foretold, for not once in that lengthy and all-inclusive plan for Germany does he mention sea power or the Navy. Perhaps the best description of Hitler comes from his own statement to his Commanders in Chief when he said, 'On land I am a hero, at sea I am a coward.' Hitler was to make all important decisions from 1939 until the end of the war.

It was during a conversation between these two men in the Spring of 1938 that Admiral Raeder first learned that Hitler's plans for Germany would eventually result in war with Great Britain. At this meeting, and repeatedly thereafter, Hitler promised Admiral Raeder that he would not risk this war with Great Britain until 1946 at the earliest. Based on this guidance, and with the approval of Hitler, the German Naval War Staff developed a plan for war with Great Britain which they called Plan Zebra. In addition to those ships already under construction, which included two aircraft carriers, Plan Zebra would have added

six battleships equal or superior to the Bismarcks, six fast cruisers, and four light cruisers; and increased the number of submarines from 51 to 241. The task organization for Plan Zebra would have been as follows: The Home Fleet—four battleships, two heavy cruisers, 51 submarines, and several light cruisers and destroyers; the Raider Forces—three pocket battleships, five heavy cruisers, five light cruisers and 190 submarines; Attack Forces 'Able' and 'Baker' would each include one carrier, three fast battleships, one heavy cruiser, and several light cruisers and destroyers. And here is the way Plan Zebra would have been executed: The Home Fleet would act as a fleet in being and hold down some of the British heavy ships in the North Sea area. The Raider Force would operate individually and widely dispersed. The British would be forced to disperse their heavy ships thinly in order to escort convoys and to seek out and destroy the surface raiders. The strong attack groups would then be sent out to destroy Great Britain's scattered heavy ships.

Whether or not Plan Zebra would have worked is pure speculation. For one thing, I wonder how the logisticians felt when they first saw the plan. Note though, that it contained the concepts of a fleet in being, *guerre de course*, and destruction of enemy forces as well. More important, it was aimed at the primary weakness of Great Britain. It was designed to deny Great Britain effective use of the sea; and, as is the case for any island country engaged in war, Great Britain had to import or die.

Of course, in 1939, most of the fleet for Plan Zebra existed on paper only, and when war came in September, Grand Admiral Raeder was, to put it in nautical terms, 'caught with his knickers at the dip.' The gloom at Naval Headquarters is reflected in a memorandum from Admiral Raeder to the Naval War Staff. He pointed out the overall deficiencies in strength, mentioning that there were only 26 submarines fit for operations in the Atlantic, and concluded by saying, 'The surface forces, moreover, can do no more than show that they know how to die gallantly.'

Gloomy prospects or not, the German Navy commenced a relentless attack on Great Britain's sea commerce. Meanwhile, land and air power were winning the war on the continent and, after the fall of France in June, and Churchill's rejection of Germany's ultimatum in July, Hitler was finally forced to come to grips with the problem of how to defeat Great Britain. Three choices were presented: (1) seize the islands by amphibious assault; (2) accept Douhet's theory and attempt to destroy the

will of the people by massive bombing attacks; or (3) cut off Great Britain's imports to the point where, with her military forces severely weakened and her people starving, she would be forced to surrender.

Detailed plans were made for Operation Sea Lion, the amphibious assault on England, but were shelved when Germany failed to gain control of the air over the channel. Even with absolute air supremacy, however, it was almost impossible for the assault to have succeeded. The German forces had not had sufficient time to prepare and train for a venture of that magnitude. The German Army was approaching the assault as if it were just another river crossing. The invasion armada consisted primarily of unpowered barges towed by fishing boats. Any serious analysis of Germany's facilities and preparations would surely have revealed that they were inferior for the task at hand.

With Operation Sea Lion on the shelf, massive bombing was the next course selected to defeat the only remaining enemy. Douhet's theory, finally put to the test, came up wanting. The massive bombing of Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square did not break the will of the British people. Apparently, it didn't even slow down the 'Americanization of Emily.'

Finally, Germany turned full attention to the task of cutting off imports to Britain. Most military analysts agree that this was the course that Germany should have taken from the beginning. The tenacious attack on British commerce, carried out mostly by German submarines, assisted considerably by the mining effort, and to a lesser degree by the surface forces, had taken a heavy toll—so heavy that Prime Minister Churchill advised President Roosevelt in December 1940 that a continuation of the diminishing trend in imports would be fatal. Yet the destruction of Britain's ability to import had been only a secondary objective of the German war effort. Although Air Marshal Goering had stated before the war, 'I'll chase the British Fleet around the British Islands,' he conspicuously avoided committing the Air Force to attacks on British harbor facilities and, for some time, had prohibited air attacks on merchant shipping.

The significance of the war on imports began to be realized by Hitler himself in January 1941, and in February he issued a directive which made British supplies from overseas the primary target of the war effort. From March until May, the Air Force attacked both shipping and ports, sinking over 500,000 tons and putting

many piers and shipyards completely out of action. Then, with the situation critical for Great Britain, the whole effort was called off because of the approaching campaign against Russia. In his post-war writings, Churchill commented, 'This was a far more deadly plan than the indiscriminate bombing of London and the civil population, and it was fortunate for us that it was not pursued with all available forces and greater persistence.'

There were, of course, other weaknesses in the German naval strategy besides the lack of a satisfactory plan to defeat England. For instance, Germany had no strategy at all for the vital Mediterranean Sea. With the fall of France, some new and interesting strategic possibilities were opened. Germany and Italy, acting in concert, had a good chance of taking Malta and the Suez and bringing already wavering Spain into the Axis fold by the end of 1941. This would have completely excluded the Allies from the Mediterranean. The effect of a completely Axis Mediterranean in the Russian campaign, as well as during the later Allied invasion of Europe, can be easily imagined. Germany's lack of a strategy for the Mediterranean left this important sea to Mussolini, who was completely incapable of exploiting the situation.

From 1941 on, no change in German naval strategy could have hoped to change the outcome of the war. We turn now to the Pacific War and Japan. In so doing, we shift from a war which was primarily a continental war, where maritime strategy played a supporting role, to a war where the sea forces were paramount and the grand strategy was basically a maritime strategy.

Looking at Japan, we find a nation with most of the necessary elements of a major sea power. Her position in Asia closely resembles that of Great Britain in Europe. Unlike Great Britain, which had become a dominant sea power early in the 16th century, the sea power potential of Japan had been kept in check until late in the 19th century. When Japan came on the world scene, she came on like 'gangbusters.' In the war against China in 1895, and again against Russia in 1905, she had challenged gigantic nations with more manpower and more resources than herself, and won important victories and territories.

In both of these early wars, the strategy of Japan was the same. She first gained supremacy at sea and then used her superior sea power to restrict the war to carefully determined limits and to occupy her land objectives. Her enemies were then faced with the situation where they had little hope of striking back at Japan across

the sea and they would pay a heavy price in blood and treasure to regain their lost territories. Rather than pay the price and end in a draw, they sought refuge in a negotiated peace. Later, military studies, including Corbett's *Principles of Maritime Strategy*, would use the Russo-Japanese War as the classic example of a 'limited war.' As used by Corbett, and the meaning intended for the remainder of the discussion this morning, the 'term 'limited war' applies to a war undertaken for the purpose of gaining a specific and limited objective with no intention of inflicting a decisive defeat upon the enemy or endangering the enemy's national survival.

Besides the ability to plan and execute a limited war, Japan exhibited two other characteristics in those early contests. One was the cool acceptance of calculated risks. The other was her ability, born of need, to carefully conserve her sea forces. The latter was particularly true in the war with Russia. The Russian fleet in Port Arthur had to be destroyed. Rather than use Admiral Togo's fleet, lying outside the harbor entrance, and risk severe losses to her sea forces, Japan sacrificed thousands upon thousands of her best troops to gain the heights above the harbor and destroy the Russian fleet with artillery fire. This is the only record in history of a naval fleet being destroyed by land forces using the battle cry, 'Cut them off at the pass.' In this way, Admiral Togo's fleet was almost at full strength when it met and defeated the Russian Baltic fleet in the later battle of Tsushima. All of these features of Japanese strategy would again be evident in the war she unleashed in the Pacific in 1941.

When Japan took her daring step in 1941, there were several items on the plus side of the ledger. Her northern flank was secure from attack by her traditional enemy because the Soviet Union was reeling under the attack of Germany. Great Britain was so busy defending her lifelines in the Atlantic and Mediterranean that she could not seriously affect the war in the Pacific for some time. Japan had a superiority of capital ships in the Pacific and she would have the opening initiative. Japan's basic defect in the struggle she was about to undertake was her extremely fragile economy. With a population over half that of the United States, her arable land was less than 3% of that of the United States. Her industrial capacity was barely the equal of Belgium and only 10% of that of the United States. She was also going to be heavily dependent upon resources from the Southwest Pacific and she was short on merchant bottoms to carry them, her merchant tonnage being about six million tons.

Japan relied on the limited war strategy that had served her so well in the past. Her objective was the mineral rich area of the Southwest Pacific. Since it was a foregone conclusion that the United States would intervene, the first move was to destroy threatening American bases and cut the American line of communications across the Pacific by capturing the Philippines, Wake, and Guam. With this accomplished, she could move into Malaya, Borneo and the Dutch Indies. The captured areas would be immediately fortified and, when added to those already held, would provide a strong defense perimeter stretching from the Kuriles in the North to the Marshalls and Gilberts in the Central Pacific to the mainland of Southeast Asia. In order to reduce the strength of the American Pacific Fleet and gain more time to prepare for a counterassault, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was added to the plan. All of this plan, including the attack on Pearl Harbor, was to be done with a minimum exposure of her capital ships. Most of the task would be accomplished with aircraft and light naval vessels which could be more easily replaced. In that way her defense perimeter would be reinforced by a formidable fleet and all the more able to resist counterattack.

With her defense perimeter secure, Japan hoped to so frustrate any counterattack, and make the job of ousting her from her position so painful, that the United States and her Allies would eventually accept the *fait accompli* of Japan's domination of the Far East.

Japan carried out the offensive phase of her plan to the letter; and in spite of almost unbelievable successes, and except for one minor excursion into the Indian Ocean, she did not allow herself to be drawn into any extra adventures. Her plan for conserving her main fleet worked to perfection. It wasn't until six months after the war began, and she attempted to expand her defense perimeter, that she lost her first capital ship, the carrier *Iosho*, in the battle of the Coral Sea. Yet Japan's strategy, carefully planned and brilliantly executed in the initial phase, was a failure.

After the war, General Tojo told General MacArthur that the three principal factors in the defeat of Japan were the leapfrogging tactics which bypassed some of Japan's most heavily defended islands, the attrition of Japanese shipping by American submarines, and the ability of our carrier task forces to operate for weeks and months without having to go into port for replenishment. At first glance and from previous experience of the Japanese, General Tojo's analysis seems close to correct. Viewed from a different level, however, these factors become the means and not the cause

of Japan's defeat. The cause was Japan's basic strategy of a limited war.

In earlier years, or even later, Japan might have succeeded; but, in 1941 and 1942, her limited war strategy was not in keeping with the political and psychological temper of the times. The United States decided to pay the price to oust her from her island stronghold. Given the impetus of war, the American economy quickly left Japan behind technically and outproduced her by four to one in capital ships alone, to say nothing of smaller ships and aircraft. Japan's limited war turned into a fight to the finish with racial overtones; and, in the end, Japan was simply overwhelmed. By throwing her entire fleet into battle at the proper time in the defensive phase, Japan could probably have delayed her defeat and made her enemies pay a dearer price for victory; but it is very doubtful that she could have changed the final outcome.

The failure of Japan's limited war strategy suggests the question of how she would have fared if she had planned for and executed an all-out war. In this regard, it is particularly interesting that most studies of the subject suggest changes in Japanese strategy that go beyond the concept of a limited war but still do not contain the ingredients for a final victory. The reason is that while these changes would remove the cramping influence of the limited war, they could still restrict Japan to a strategically independent war. In the global conflict that was taking place, an independent war was just as unsound as a limited war. The Japanese strategists themselves were not totally unaware of this. They knew that their chance of success was closely tied to the outcome in Europe; yet, they were reluctant to join their Axis allies in a unified strategy.

The frailty of the Axis alliance stands in contrast to the solidarity of the alliance that opposed them. The singleness of purpose of the Allied Powers is exemplified by a comment of Winston Churchill. Just before the German attack on Russia, the Prime Minister informed our Ambassador that he intended to go all out to help the Soviets. Ambassador Winant asked if this wasn't a bit out of character for the great anticommunist. Mr. Churchill replied that it was not out of character at all; his primary purpose was the defeat of the Nazis and, if Hitler invaded Hell, he would stand in the House of Commons and personally say a kind word for the Devil.

Had the Axis powers attained a solidified alliance and the same sense of purpose, the results could have been far-reaching. Speculation as to the total effect would probably lead too far; but, consider the possibilities in the Indian Ocean. In 1942 the entire global strategy of the Allies rested on their ability to maintain the bulwark of China, Russia, India, and the Near East between the Axis nations. The supplies that supported this central bloc came almost exclusively through the Indian Ocean. Without them, the German advance could not have been turned back by the Russians at Stalingrad, or by the British at El Alamein. There is a fair possibility that the entire central area would have fallen under Axis domination before the industrial and military power of the United States could have been mobilized and brought to bear. Important as these supplies were, it would have been appropriate to have stamped every one of them, 'Shipped By Permission of the Japanese Navy.' Allied naval power had been staggered by the blows struck in the early months of the Pacific War. Japan was the master of the Western Pacific, and, if she so desired, the Indian Ocean as well. Her naval superiority in the area was too great for any combined force that the United States and Great Britain could muster. It was indeed fortunate for the Allies that Japan kept her strategic independence and allowed this large volume of critical supplies to be channeled through the Indian Ocean.

Dr. Rosinski, writing for *The Infantry Journal*, says that both Germany and Japan were defeated because they did not obey the principles of Clausewitz. Perhaps he is right, for Clausewitz said in his last statement that the first, the greatest, and the most decisive act of judgment which a statesman, or a commander, is ever called upon to perform is that of correctly appreciating the nature of the war which he is about to unleash, so that he will not take it for something, or try to make it into something, which, in view of the circumstances, it cannot be.

Hitler certainly ignored the warning of Clausewitz. He conducted his war in Europe by rash action and ad hoc strategies. He began a war which he knew would lead to a fight with Great Britain, whose sea power had dominated the European continent for generations. Yet, he had not developed the necessary forces or conceived a plan to defeat her. When an unexpectedly quick victory on land presented the possibility of success against Great Britain, he had no strategy other than trial and error. Turning east without securing his seaward flank, he was open to the attack that later poured across the sea and brought his jerry-built strategy tumbling down like a house of cards.

Japan fell into the second trap about which Clausewitz has warned. Her strategists ignored the political situation brought about by the war in Europe and they misjudged the psychological effect of their own war in the Pacific, including the attack on Pearl Harbor. They embarked upon a war which they did not have the strength to win and, deceiving themselves, tried to make it into something which politically, psychologically, and strategically it could not be—a limited war.

On that note, let us leave the analysis of the wars of Germany and Japan and turn our attention instead to some thought-provoking questions that are raised by events of World War II. First of all, both Great Britain, blessed with all the necessary elements of a great sea power, and Japan, having most of these elements, were also proven to have the critical weakness inherent to all island nations. They had to import large volumes of strategic materials or be defeated. To see how that lesson applies to us today, spin the globe around and pick off the names of the free world nations: Great Britain, Japan, the Philippines, the Republic of China on Formosa, and so on. It soon becomes apparent that the free world alliance has all the characteristics of one vast island nation. In the event of a prolonged war, are we prepared in technology, in numerical strength, and in our state of training, to sustain the volume of sea traffic that would be required? This problem should receive continued and thorough attention. It is all well and good to extol the virtues of sea power and to say that we feel perfectly safe as long as we have one foot in salt water, but we must remember that while we are standing in that rather awkward position, we are wide open for a kick where it hurts the most.

World War II also gives rise again to the specter that haunts all strategic and military planners—the false assumption. Germany's effort to defeat Great Britain by massive bombing, and Japan's strategy to conquer the Western Pacific by limited war, failed because they were based on psychological assumptions that were in error. This suggests that we should regularly review our own strategy and naval posture to be sure that the psychological assumptions are sound. The addition of nuclear weapons to the warfare arsenal makes this particularly important, for they have brought about an age where perhaps the most important factor of strategy is the psychological factor, which is difficult to measure. The theory of nuclear deterrence, based on this factor that cannot be adequately measured, is in the same status as Douhet's theory before World War II. It has not been put to the full test. More important, for some time now, it has been difficult to say who is

detering whom. Under these circumstances, we must guard against relying heavily on strategies that assume either that we will initiate the use of nuclear weapons, or that the threat of such initiation will deter enemy action.

There are other questions that are raised by the failure of Germany and Japan, but it is not the purpose of this lecture to enumerate them. The purpose is to give you a case of the strategy measles, if you will, so that this lecture will blend into those already heard and those yet to be given—the final result being a reminder to us all that naval strategy and the role of sea power are complex and challenging subjects, deserving of our attention for many years to come.

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