

The Strategy In The Battle For The Atlantic

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Abstract:

The Battle for the Atlantic, initiated by Great Britain on Germany has been a subject of debate on whether it was the crucial factor that led to the outcome of the Second World War (WWII) in Europe. This essay will address why the Battle for the Atlantic offered opportunities for the Allies to implement strategies and invade Europe successfully. The essay will also examine both the Allies and the Germans' strategies, which would become the decisive factor for the Allies to win the war.

Keywords: Allied Forces, World War II, Battle of the Atlantic, Strategic Failure

INTRODUCTION

The Battle of the Atlantic—the longest naval campaign of the twentieth century, commenced on 3rd September 1939 with the declaration of war on Germany by Great Britain, and ended on 8th May 1945 with the surrender of Germany. Winston Churchill declared the Battle as “the dominating factor all through the war. Never for one moment could we forget that everything happening elsewhere, on land, at sea or in the air depended ultimately on its outcome.”¹

Existing literature has postulated that the victory attained in the Atlantic, albeit costly, was the decisive factor contributing to the outcome of the Second World War (WWII) in Europe. However, given that the outcomes of wars are hardly mono-causal, and that the forces of fog and friction in war could dramatically change the outcomes, it is important that the context in which the centrality of the Atlantic to the outcome of the war in Europe be explained. Therefore, this paper seeks to support the argument that the victory achieved in the Battle of the Atlantic established the springboard for the subsequent Allied invasion of Europe, insofar as the coherent British and allied strategy, coupled with a disjointed German strategy, made the Battle a decisive factor.

The essay will discuss this in several sections. Firstly, the British and German strategies will be discussed. Next, the economic management and industrialisation of the Allied powers and their significance to the Battle will be analysed. The essay will then discuss key points in the German U-boat campaign against Allied shipping. Finally, the essay will examine possible critics of the argument.

NATIONAL STRATEGIES

Great Britain

Great Britain, as her national strategy articulated by Churchill, sought to adopt a defensive posture while rapidly mobilising for war. In a war expected and planned to last three years, the combined economies of Britain and her allies were assessed to prevail against a Germany weakened by Allied blockades. The Atlantic therefore lay at the heart of British strategy. Defeat in the Atlantic would have brought about Britain's defeat through the starvation of the British economy of much needed imports of food and war materials. Therefore, mobilisation of the nation's economy, which would be discussed in a later section, was central to the British strategy. These included measures at the national level to



Officers on the bridge of an escorting British destroyer kept a sharp look out for enemy submarines, October 1941

reduce civilian consumption in order to conserve scant stocks of imported food and raw materials. Victory in the Atlantic was hence a necessary precondition to winning the war in continental Europe by ensuring Britain's continued ability to meet both civil and military needs essential to continuing a prolonged war. However, despite the importance tagged to its merchant fleet, the Royal Navy (RN) was initially unprepared to counter the German U-boat threat. This was largely due to the British confidence, albeit misplaced, in the effectiveness of the Allied Submarine Detection Investigation Committee (ASDIC) sonar and the erroneous perceived ineffectiveness of the German U-boat arm due to limitations imposed after World War One (WWI). Nevertheless, the British recovered from the initial setbacks. Significant resources were poured into research to enhance military measures adopted by the RN. These included research into the effectiveness

of aircraft and surface ship attacks on U-boats, comparisons of convoys and independent shipping and effects of speed on anti-submarine warfare (ASW) effectiveness.²

Another key aspect of the British strategy was the co-operative measures, short of an alliance, sought with the United States (US). Despite the US entering the war late, and her interests in the Pacific after the Pearl Harbour attack causing an unlikely 'Germany first' military approach desired by the Allies initially, American assistance in the form of destroyer escorts, escort carriers, repair of naval and merchant shipping and most importantly mass building of merchant shipping made the British defensive strategy attainable and rendered any German hopes of strangling the Allied economies by sinking shipping in the Atlantic totally unrealistic.³

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Germany

Germany adopted a continental strategy during WWII, seeking hegemony in Europe through settlement with Great Britain. In *Mein Kampf*,⁴ Hitler wrote that “only with England, was it possible, with the rear protected, to begin the new German advance... no sacrifice should have been too great to win England's favour,”⁵ expounding the criticality of establishing an at-best friendly, at-worst neutral Britain, in the German strategy. During the negotiation with Britain for the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in June 1935, Germany agreed to the limitations in the developments of her naval power to the order of 35 percent of each category of British surface ships and 45 percent of British submarines as part of Germany's foreign policy, as long as the ratio of 35:100 for total tonnage was adhered to.⁶ By recognising British supremacy at sea, Hitler strategised to secure Germany's position in continental Europe before bidding for seapower. Moreover, Hitler was “personally convinced that in the end the western democracies will shy away from precipitating a general war” and the likely outcome of any German-initiated war in Europe would be “a trade barrier, with severance of relations.”⁷

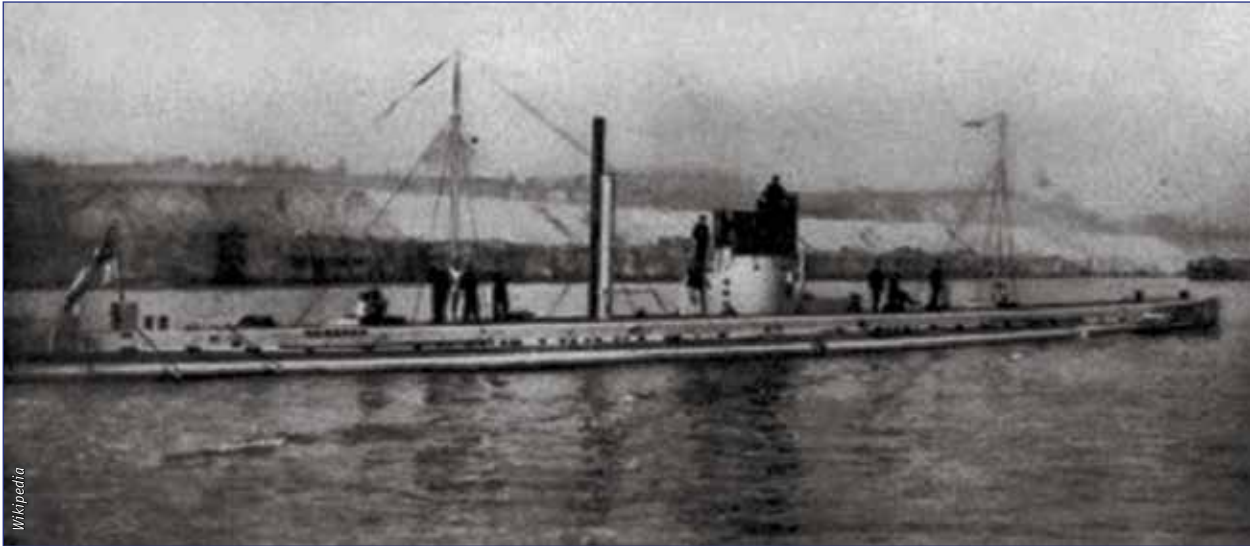
With the 'settlement with Britain' strategy in the background, the priority in the development of the German Armed Forces was on the Air Force and the

Army. The German Navy (Kriegsmarine), already limited by the amount of surface ships and the prohibition of submarines under the Treaty of Versailles post WWI, was further handicapped by the continued prioritisation of resources for the air force and the army during the war and hence continued to be significantly weak. Although Hitler had approved the Kriegsmarine's fleet modernisation plan to be ready by 1944-45, the early decision to go to war with Poland in September 1939 brought the Kriegsmarine into a naval war she was unprepared for. While correctly assessing that the British centre of gravity lies in the Atlantic which provided the sea routes for the vast majority of imports of food and war material, the German naval strategy of sea denial, once it seemed that the settlement strategy was untenable, could not be sustained due to the limited naval assets available to the Kriegsmarine. This was exacerbated with U-boat diversions to the Mediterranean when Germany declared war on Russia. From the German perspective, it could be argued that the importance of the Battle was not accredited with commensurate emphasis and resources, resulting in the German failure in the Atlantic.

INDUSTRIALISATION VS THE BATTLE AT SEA

Given that the British strategy focused on the economic strength of the Allies, the industrial prowess of Britain and the US in the face of German submarine threats and attacks are critical in ensuring a victorious Atlantic war. Beyond merely a battle at sea, the Battle of the Atlantic could be seen as a “gigantic battle of attrition and economic management” between the opposing powers consisting of two of the world's largest industrial empires.⁸

To counter the German strategy of strangling the British will and ability to sustain the war, Great Britain adopted a combination of different economic strategies. To reduce her dependency on imports and conserve existing war supplies, Britain reduced her



German U-boat U-9

need for imports from 60 million tons to 26 million tons a year.⁹ The British population expenditure in 1941 was considerably less than it was before the war: 20% less on food, 38% less on clothes, 43% less on household goods and 76% less on private motoring.¹⁰ At the same time, Britain made improvisations to her economic mobilisation. Attractive recruitment measures were put in place to ensure that merchant ships continued to be manned despite the perils and stress of the dangerous duty of the merchant seamen, where an average of one in six perish. Idling industrial capacity, which stood at 10% of Britain's total industrial capacity, were fully utilised by the end of the war. To enhance distribution of the imported materials arriving via the Atlantic to their destinations, bottlenecks inland such as the clearance process of materials, distribution of materials for dispatch and the inland transport networks were improved. Given that the main lines of Britain's railway network left from London, significant improvements in the railway system were made, costing £11.5 million by the end of the war. These railways eventually transported 11% more tonnage of cargo compared to pre-war, and on average over 32% greater distances, despite enemy bombing and loss of workforce to the armed

forces and munition manufacture.¹¹ These represented an equivalent of a million tonnes of extra shipping through the Atlantic.

Besides these, a significant contribution to the British strategy was the enormous capacity of the British and American shipbuilding and ship-repairing industries. In the inter-war periods, the British shipbuilding and ship-repairing industries were considerably weak as a result of the inter-war economic slump causing the closure of about thirty or about 1/3 of existing shipyards. Nevertheless, the requirements of the war revealed the enormous capacity of the British industry. In terms of shipbuilding, production output increased by approximately four times since the commencement of the Battle to a peak in 1943. Table 1 summarises the naval assets built in the Great Britain in the years 1939 to 1945.

Besides naval shipbuilding capacity, the output of merchant shipping maintained at an annual rate similar to the years preceding the war. 1,576 merchant ships were launched between 1940-1945 despite shortages of labour and materials.¹² Besides shipbuilding, the ship-repairing industry also responded to the vastly increased demands in wartime. In addition to regular

	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	TOTAL
Battleships, Carriers, Cruisers	3	10	11	8	10	6	7	55
Destroyers	22	27	39	73	37	31	22	251
Frigates, Corvettes	5	49	74	30	57	73	28	316
Submarines	7	15	20	33	39	39	17	170
Minelayers, Sweepers,	20	47	92	95	79	39	28	400
Total Ships	57	148	236	239	222	188	102	1134

Table 1: British Warship Building Output 1939-1945¹³

ship overhaul and dry docking, there was the need for damage repairs, both due to enemy actions as well as collisions and groundings. Conversion works were also critical, where commercial liners and trawlers were converted into armed merchant cruisers and anti-submarine patrol crafts or minesweepers respectively.¹⁴ By the end of 1941, some 2,000 conversions had been completed.¹⁵

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Complementing British internal industrial mobilisation was the strength of the American industrial capacity that provided Britain with much needed supplies, both civil and military. 50 aging destroyers were transferred to the Royal Navy in return for 99-year leases on the then-Dominion naval and air bases.¹⁶ In addition, the Lend-Lease Act also authorised the transfer of 28 motor torpedo boats,

3,000 propelling charges and medium calibre naval guns, gun-mounts and ammunition to arm British merchant ships. 2,400 planes were also shipped to Britain in 1941.¹⁷ An additional US\$7 billion of food was subsequently shipped to Britain to alleviate food shortage.¹⁸ Finally, to sustain the merchant fleet transporting cargo from the US to Britain, the US provided about three million tonnes and manufactured another approximately ten million tonnes of merchant shipping up to March 1943 (by which time the German U-boat campaign had sunk around 18.5 million tonnes of Allied shipping in total).¹⁹ The industrial capacity of the US, to manufacture for both her own increasing needs in the Pacific theatre, as well as that of the Allies in the Atlantic and more critically, for the survival of Britain, cannot be overstated in the outcome of the Battle.

GERMAN U-BOAT CAMPAIGN

The German U-boat campaign in the Atlantic represented Hitler's attempt at attacking Britain's centre of gravity once the settlement strategy became implausible. Churchill stated after the war, "the only thing that ever really frightened me during the war was the U-boat peril... It would have been wise for the Germans to stake all on it."²⁰ Nevertheless, despite sporadic periods of success, the U-boat campaign was not pursued in a manner reflecting its importance in the overall war and as a result, did not lead to eventual victory for Hitler.

At the start of the war, only 57 German U-boats had been built, and only 26 of these were suitable for Atlantic operations.²¹ Admiral Eric Raeder, Commandant of the Kriegsmarine, argued that the U-boat programme had to yield 20 to 30 boats a month as soon as possible as it was “of decisive importance for the war against Great Britain” and that such yields could only be achieved by “giving it priority over all other programmes.”²² However, given Hitler's views that securing Germany's continental position was critical before any war against Great Britain, the proposal was put aside “until the Army had taken the most important positions.” Only then should “industrial production be diverted to benefit the Air Force and Navy for the war against Great Britain.”²³ Nevertheless, the early offensive of the U-boats produced great success, sinking 215 merchant ships and two warships, taking over 1,500 lives, within the first four months of the Battle.²⁴ This continued in January and February of 1940, with the Germans sinking 85 ships while losing only 3 U-boats.²⁵ However, the U-boat campaign was not sustained. This was due to the German invasion of Norway on 3rd March, causing the redeployment of U-boats to support the invasion. Consequently, British merchant shipping losses declined.

The period from June 1940 to May 1941 represented another period of U-boat success for the Germans, with the development of the Wolfpack tactics to counter the increased number of escorts. At the same time, the ceasure of escort operations in the mid-Atlantic and the “Black Pit” area in the Central North Atlantic where Allied land-based aircraft could not reach provided ideal hunting grounds for the U-boats. Referred to by U-boat crews as the ‘Happy Time’, merchant vessels losses amounted to 217 during this period, with only a corresponding loss of 6 U-boats.²⁶ However, this again could not be sustained due to the lack of boats, their need for replenishment of supplies, and

also rest for the crew. By the end of May 1941, the emergence of continual escorts across the Atlantic by the Royal Canadian Navy, coupled with limitations in the German U-boat force, marked the end of the first Happy Time. The operational limitations of the U-boat force were worsened by the continued neglect of the U-boat construction programme as a result of Hitler's decisions to consider invading Britain, thereby causing the continued prioritisation of resources for the Army. In addition, towards the end of 1941, almost half of the U-boats available at sea in all areas were diverted to the Mediterranean to address problems of Axis shipping losses resulting from the Allied blockade.

The second ‘Happy Time’ for the German U-boat campaign was from December 1941 to December 1942. Despite the lack of prioritisation of U-boat construction, the rate of construction reached about 12 to 18 a month.²⁷ Though this was short of the 20 to 30 required by Raeder, it still resulted in the increase in total number of operational U-boats from 37 in May to 120 by the end of 1941, with the number of boats at sea reaching 60 by the end of the year.²⁸ With the US entering the war after the attack on Pearl Harbour, U-boats were deployed to the eastern coast of the US to attack unprotected shipping and disrupt the transportation of raw materials along the American coast. When Allied anti-submarine defences were enhanced, the U-boat shifted their operation areas southward into the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, and subsequently back to the Mid-Atlantic. During this period, U-boats sunk over 6.25 million tons of shipping, three times that of 1941.²⁹ However, U-boat losses had also begun to rise from an average of three per month since the beginning of the Battle to an average of about thirteen from July to November.³⁰ With the exorbitant increase in the cost of disrupting Allied supplies via the Atlantic, and with the need to commit forces to counter Allied landings in North

Africa, U-boats were again diverted from the Atlantic. The offensive arm that the U-boat represented was therefore reduced to delaying the inevitable Allied offensive operations.

By May 1943, developments in convoy operations, escort carriers and long range aircraft equipped with radars and high frequency 'Huff-Duff' direction finders further reduced the effectiveness of the U-boats. The continued high losses in U-boats led to the total withdrawal of the boats from the North Atlantic by the end of that same month.

The U-boat campaign was critical in analysing the outcome of the Battle of the Atlantic. The brief successes of the U-boat campaign could not be sustained due to pre-war naval strategies and policies, as well as strategic decisions made during the war. The decisions to commence the war in Poland early, to invade Norway and France (though for the latter it brought about operational benefits to the U-boat campaign in terms of reducing transit time to the U-boat operations area in the Atlantic), the consideration of the invasion of Britain, as well as the opening up of a second front with Russia created immense pressures on the U-boat force, which was already ill-equipped and insufficiently numbered for the naval battle in the Atlantic. Despite recognising the criticality of the U-boats in achieving the strategy of strangling British imports, Hitler was averse to prioritising the U-boat construction programme over requirements of the Air Force and Army, despite being advised by Raeder on several occasions. By the time Hitler, in a special conference on 28 September 1942, expounded his new-found conviction that "the U-boats played a decisive role in the outcome of the War,"³¹ it

was too little support and too late. Hitler had failed to dominate the trade routes in the Atlantic, unable to starve Britain of her supplies, and had failed in his overall strategy. As advised by Colonel Josef Schmid, head of German Air Intelligence, "The war cannot be ended in a manner favourable to us as long as Britain has not been mastered. Economic assistance from particularly the USA, and the encirclement of Germany, must not be permitted to come fully into operation."³²

CRITICS OF THE ARGUMENT

This essay has argued that Churchill's claim was only valid because of the strategies adopted by the key powers in the Battle, namely Britain and Germany. From the British perspective, however, such an argument may not be valid because a German victory in the Atlantic would likely contribute to the demise of Britain, regardless of the strategy Britain adopts, given her heavy reliance on imports via the Atlantic. Winning the Battle was crucial and vital

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to Britain, and hence immense resources were provided to ensure that the U-boat threat was nullified. Nevertheless, it would be preposterous to assume that victory in the Battle would translate to victory in Europe. The nature of warfare, with its

accompanying friction of war, precludes the ability of historians to conclude decisively what the outcome would have been had singular factors been changed. After all, if the weather and sea conditions on the 6th of June had taken a turn for the worse, or if the Germans had not fallen for the decoy operations, the Normandy landings could have turned out differently, regardless of the Allied victory in the Atlantic. Therefore, victory in the Atlantic could only determine the survival of Britain, but could not assure an Allied victory in Europe.

CONCLUSION

Britain and Germany, key players in the opposing powers of WWII, adopted different strategies in which the Battle of the Atlantic took on differing significance during different periods during the war. For Britain, the Atlantic signified her survival, and hence the necessity to win the war at sea. For Germany, the Atlantic represents her naval strategy of sea denial, after failing to secure a settlement with Britain, as a means to bring Britain to the negotiating table and accept German hegemony. Despite recognising Britain's vulnerability in its sea lines of communications across the Atlantic, Hitler's initial strategy focused largely on securing her continental position in Europe with the wars against Poland, France, Norway and Russia instead of sea denial. As a result, both countries differed greatly in their approaches to according priority and allocating resources to the Battle, whether militarily, in the German U-boat construction programme, or economically, in the British economic measures and support obtained from the US. Despite the U-boat being "the backbone of warfare against England and of political pressure on her," Hitler's reluctance to reinforce initial successes in the Atlantic led to missed opportunities and ultimately sealed the outcome of the Battle.³³ The disjoint between strategy and resource allocations therefore led to the German defeat in the Battle and contributed to the outcome of WWII in Europe. 🌐

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