
The effectiveness of the leadership of Admiral Karl Dönitz

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World War II submarine warfare epitomized the effect of the ebb and flow of scientific, technological and naval warfare discoveries ... This was a deadly game played by the guiding hand of Dönitz on the German side, with the submariners as the pawns.

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Introduction

1. At the eleventh-hour of World War II, in announcing Hitler's demise and his appointment as Hitler's successor as Führer of the Third Reich, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz (born 16 Sep 1891– died 24 Dec 1980) stated to the German people: 'Fully conscious of the responsibility, I take over the leadership of the German people at this fateful hour.'² He had inherited possibly the least promising promotion in either military or political history—the mother of all hospital handpasses—an unwinnable situation in a moribund Germany. However, the appointment of Dönitz as Führer is indicative of the influential role that he played during the war, especially in the conduct of submarine warfare against the Allies, and his abilities as both a commander and leader.

2. The aim of this paper is to critically examine the command and leadership of Dönitz and assess the extent to which he was an effective leader. It will not specifically examine his command as Commander-in-Chief Navy. To achieve this aim, this paper will briefly make some general observations of the command ability of Dönitz. It will then go into greater analysis of Dönitz's leadership capability. Rather than merely measuring his effectiveness by the degree of success he attained or results achieved—or detecting only those qualities and characteristics that he used to create an environment where German submariners all felt like they were part of something extraordinary—this paper will incrementally consider Dönitz against four theoretical approaches to leadership: personality traits; behavioural style; power and influence; and the situational or contingency approach.³

Command and leadership

3. Command is the lawful or formal authority granted to an individual by virtue of rank and/or appointment. By definition, therefore, in a strict legal sense, anyone can be a commander. There are many ways to effect command, including legislation, rank, seniority, appointment, assignment, discipline, punishment and reward. In practice we would expect to see a combination of those mechanisms being applied towards effectively using available resources and for planning the employment of, organising, directing, coordinating and controlling military forces for the accomplishment of assigned missions. Command also incorporates a more general responsibility for health, welfare, morale and discipline of the personnel assigned to that command.

4. Dönitz was commissioned into Germany's Imperial Navy in 1910.⁴ However, his career would not reach its zenith until World War II. In 1935, in the shadow of the Treaty of Versailles,⁵ which prohibited Germany from possessing submarines, the Anglo–German Naval Agreement⁶ saw the

emergence of the German *Unterseeboot* (U-boat), which ultimately lead to Dönitz's appointment as *Befehlshaber der Unterseeboote* (BdU), heading up the nation's U-boat service in 1939.⁷ He fulfilled the obligations of that appointment until January 1943 when he was promoted to *Oberbefehlshaber der Kriegsmarine* (Commander-in-Chief of the German Combat Navy), although he retained his appointment as BdU.⁸

5. As BdU, there is no doubt that Dönitz had the necessary formal authority to command. Moreover, he was an operational level commander—commanding at the point where 'top down' and 'bottom up' command interact or where the strategic (outwards and upwards) and tactical (inwards and downwards) views coalesce.⁹ However, a commander need not be a leader.

6. Leadership is primarily concerned with influence—to get people to *willingly* do things *how* and *when* the leader wants them done. But a commander's ability to inspire and motivate individuals to do something cannot rely solely on such 'system bestowed' formal authority as rank, position or even legislation.¹⁰ Thus, leadership describes a suite of other abstract qualities to that of command, because it incorporates attributes that tend to be innate, as opposed to acquired; attributes like presence, personality, charisma and intellect. Leadership is not intended to replace or reduce command authority, but it produces more effective results, because it engages personnel at a deeper, more personal level. Leadership is an art and is not inherent in rank, seniority or appointment. Formal status might help to establish leadership, but it is unlikely to be sufficient in itself.

Leadership effectiveness

7. Leadership effectiveness is the power or ability to influence or produce a result from others. It requires three identifiable factors: personal characteristics or traits; behaviour; and the predetermined circumstances under which various commanders or leaders operate. These factors have been variously incorporated into a variety of models that will be considered in relation to Dönitz.

Personality traits¹¹

8. Empirically, Dönitz had little practical submarine experience, spending less than three of his 35 years naval service aboard U-boats, but he was a firm believer in the value of the submarine and the men that operated them:

It is unlikely that he had modelled himself consciously on Nelson, yet he shared many of Nelson's qualities – absolute commitment to victory, absolute belief in his men and the force he commanded, absolute hatred of the enemy creed, indeed of the enemy, absolute commitment to his own country and creed. He was a convinced Nazi.¹²

9. Although he may have been a committed Nazi, a telling aspect of Dönitz's Nelson-type character was his ability to instil in his men an unquestioning dedication and devotion. He spoke to them of the need for a 'fanatical willingness to die'; that service to the Fatherland was an end in itself.¹³ To that end, the relationship between Dönitz and his men in the submarine service can perhaps best be described as 'personal'. He identified the submarines as 'his submarines' and the men as 'his men'. Dönitz made a point of personal contact with his commanding officers; he knew the crews. He epitomised for them what it meant to be a submariner and a member of a very special elite group.¹⁴

10. Perhaps the best index of crew morale was the fact that at the end of the war, 43 U-boats were at sea on operations. But this fanaticism resulted in devastating losses. Commencing with 57 operational boats, the Germans built more than 1,150 during the war and approximately 800 were

either sunk or destroyed. Furthermore, 32,000 men were either killed or captured out of a total force of about 40,000. Such a rate loss was matched only by the Japanese Kamikazes. Yet, for the duration of the war effort, the U-boats operated tirelessly. Notwithstanding, personality traits do not guarantee effective leadership; they must be considered in concert with behavioural style, which has a large bearing on group performance, and the circumstances.

Behavioural style¹⁵

11. Behaviour denotes the way in which a commander and leader inspires, exhorts, drives and motivates his men. Behavioural style refers to consistent behaviours or actions that are seen by others as representing a leader's style. During 1935 and the establishment of the fledgling U-boat arm, Dönitz advocated personal contact during intensive sea training: going to sea daily, sharing in the conditions of submarine life in egalitarian fashion, and encouraging camaraderie between officers and enlisted men, thereby imbuing a 'sense of mutual confidence'.¹⁶ His behavioural style was democratic rather than autocratic, displaying a genuine concern for his people, but not at the expense of losing his task orientation.¹⁷ The men called him 'The Lion' and idolised him for his competence and the respect and concern he showed for them.¹⁸ His continuity in command also ensured that his influence was long felt.

12. Dönitz, expecting the utmost from his men at sea, was commensurate in his treatment of them upon their return: special trains, rest camps known as 'U-boat pastures', and special shops for spending their substantial allowances.¹⁹ Moreover, his personal inspiration included attending every training course's passing-out parade and as many departures and arrivals of U-boats as possible.²⁰ However, Dönitz commanded from his headquarters at Wilhelmshaven and then later Berlin. Perhaps in contrast to those inspirational 'lead-from-the-front' heroes of World War II, Dönitz was a successful distance warfare commander, enjoying a remarkable degree of loyalty from the men he commanded. To understand the leadership Dönitz exercised over his people, even from afar, we need to consider his use of power and influence.

Power and influence²¹

13. Power is the potential ability to influence others' behaviour.²² Accepting that personal power is the basis for a leader's personal authority to lead,²³ then Dönitz's power was complete, in that he enjoyed formal, expert, reward, coercive and referent powers.²⁴ Dönitz had the formal power of his position as BdU. His expert power was derived from his recognised competency, and although not physically imposing, he had coercive power by virtue of the German machine, though rarely needed to exercise it. His reward power was somewhat renowned, as was his personal or referent power, which was exemplified by his personal traits and behavioural style. Dönitz sustained a high level of morale in his U-boat crews through the promise of new and more effective weapons and their superior service conditions.

14. But Dönitz did not just exercise this power downwards; he also employed his influence upwards. Dönitz realised very early that the Allies could be defeated by cutting off England's import trade and hence bring about her capitulation, otherwise succeeding where the U-boat had failed in World War I. To implement this strategy, however, Dönitz aimed to achieve economic superiority—to sink Allied ships faster than they could be built.²⁵ This entailed sinking 700,000 tons per month, which was beginning to be achieved by May 1942. Hitler began to take more than just a personal interest in the U-boats and Dönitz capitalised on this interest in an opportunistic manner, propagating his own doctrine that it was only through U-boat operations that the defeat of Britain could be achieved.²⁶

Situational (contingency) approach²⁷

15. The preceding approaches to identifying Dönitz's leadership effectiveness do not provide a complete picture of his leadership capability, as they do not emphasise the importance of the context or circumstances in which his leadership occurred. The context or circumstances are the objective forces such as the era, the setting, the geography, the values and the politics. The situational or contingency approaches describe the relationship between leadership styles and specific organisational situations. An analysis of Dönitz within this framework will reveal his true leadership effectiveness or otherwise.

16. Dönitz's operational leadership abilities came to the fore in his refinement of the 'wolf-pack' attack, which had been first suggested during World War I. But, prior to the outbreak of war, Dönitz had sought a massive expansion of the U-boat force to 300 as part of the 'Z Plan' for the *Kriegsmarine*, which did not envisage war with Britain until 1945.²⁸ While the principle of the 'wolf-pack' attack was proven, Dönitz never had the numerical superiority to sustain the attacks and the large majority of U-boat 'kills' were achieved via other tactics.

17. In contrast to Dönitz's obvious strategical genius, there was the snail's pace of the Americans and the British in terms of reinstating an effective convoy system.²⁹ Similarly, the success of the U-boat campaign in the North Atlantic was partly due to a flawed anti-submarine strategy, which the Allies were slow to abandon. Thus, when combined with Dönitz's imaginative coordination of reconnaissance aircraft, resupply vessels and multiple submarine 'wolf-packs', his boats were allowed to strike where they were most effective and least expected.³⁰

18. Dönitz's success as the head of the U-boat command rivals that of any other of Germany's wartime achievements. Indeed, during the first three years of World War II nothing appeared capable of standing in the way of this service.³¹ There were a variety of factors that interplayed to formulate the tremendous accomplishments of the U-Boat Service. Advancements in science and technology were particularly critical to this success.³² This was true both in regard to offensive and defensive actions of the U-Boat Service.³³ Submarine offence, anti-submarine warfare defence, radar and anti-radar detection, torpedo technology, mine warfare, radio transmission and detection, SONAR, submarine and ASW ship design and performance; and of course, the now familiar performance of designing codes and their reading by each side in the ebb and flow surrounding Enigma, were only a few of the critical factors deciding the outcome of this deadly game of war.³⁴ However, a lack of awareness of the Allies' leading technological advances, do call into question Dönitz's foresight:

He was part of a service that, by the nature of the Führer system and the fight for its own allocations, strategies, indeed its very existence, had turned inwards, and was as divorced from reality and wedded to the Aryan myth as the Führer himself. Personally Dönitz was both victim and exemplar of the myth.³⁵

19. It is contended that Dönitz's effectiveness as head of the U-Boat Service was a matter of circumstance, that in fact his removal from that post was opportune, as that removal would be at that critical point in time when the Allies would close the 'air gap' and begin to win the battles of the convoys.³⁶ Similarly, the removal of Raeder as Commander-in-Chief Navy gave rise to an opportunity at this critical time for Dönitz to take over new responsibilities, just as the odds began to stack against his old duties of U-Boat Service. However, Dönitz's influence with Hitler cannot be discounted from the equation. Despite declining German naval fortunes, he retained Hitler's confidence in his abilities; a noteworthy fact in itself, given Hitler's personality and leadership strategy.

20. By April 1943, when the U-boats had lost their economic superiority and the sinking rate

required for victory had risen to 1.3 million tons per month, Dönitz decided to carry on. Given that the U-boats demanded scarce resources—steel, copper, constructions workers, the acknowledged elite U-boat men and good commanders—and there was no hope of victory, the decision is somewhat irrational and vividly highlights the flaws in Dönitz’s qualities. Throwing more boats and crews away instead of husbanding them carefully while seeking new types and tactics, and a new strategy, was anachronistic and prodigal folly.³⁷

Conclusion

21. Submarine and mine warfare are enormously effective weapons in the hands of a nation facing an enemy with a more powerful navy. With consummate skill, using relatively minor expenditures of cash, raw materials or personnel, the Germans all but crippled the British. Dönitz’s iron determination of leadership and prowess of his men, had victory in his grasp, but the intrinsic nature of U-boat warfare was changing, and Dönitz failed to see the changes. The German effort reflected a rather romantic view of war—that the human dimension is the decisive dimension—that men who are the best trained, with the best inspiration, with the most to fight for, would be the ones to triumph, rather than those with the materiel advantages or the most numbers.

22. Dönitz made the U-boat men abundantly aware that they were part of an elite. He adored his boats, championed their crews and was rewarded with unparalleled commitment and devotion. The spirit of the U-boat training, combined with the character imbued through German upbringing in a rigid society that demanded an unquestioning obedience to orders, effectively prepared the U-boat men to commit suicide.

23. Dönitz displayed an abundance of deep thought in his revolutionary ideas of submarine warfare, and he had the leadership ability and fanaticism to train his submarine commanders to achieve outstanding success in implementing his tactical and operational ideas. While there remained gaps in the Allies’ anti-submarine defence, he was a truly effective leader in terms of personality traits, behavioural style, and power and influence. However, once those gaps had been closed via a flow of scientific, technological and naval warfare discoveries, his answers would never come to fruition due to the increasingly scarce resources and time available to him. In that respect, it is difficult not to conclude otherwise that he was an ineffective leader in terms of a situational or contingency approach to leadership.

Endnotes

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