

GRAND ADMIRAL KARL DÖNITZ AND THE LAST DAYS OF THE THIRD REICH

His Military Career, His Succession as Head of State, His Government,
and the Surrender of Nazi Germany

M. NAZRUL ISLAM*
TASHDIQUE MANNAN**

Introduction

On the afternoon of 30 April 1945, with Berlin engulfed in flames and besieged by the Russians, Adolf Hitler, the Chancellor of Nazi Germany, took his own life in his cement bunker beneath the complex of the Reich Chancellery in the heart of the city. At the eleventh-hour of World War II, in announcing Hitler's demise and his appointment as Hitler's successor as Führer and President of the Third Reich, Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz (born 16 September 1891- died 24 December 1980) stated to the German people: 'Fully conscious of the responsibility, I take over the leadership of the German people at this fateful hour.'

Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz had inherited possibly the least promising promotion in either military or political history - 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 also of his outstanding abilities as both a commander and leader of men.

The aim of this paper is to examine the events leading up to the accession of Admiral Dönitz as President of Germany, the formation of his government, and the surrender of Nazi Germany to the victorious Allied Powers by his government. Before that, however, it will also attempt to examine the command and leadership abilities of Dönitz and assess the extent to which he was an effective leader - as the Head of the Submarine Service of the German Navy, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, and eventually the last President of the Third Reich.

Accession of Dönitz to the German Leadership in May 1945

For a few brief weeks during late April and May of 1945, another leader of Europe came to power, an honourable man, respected even within the military councils of the Allies. That man was Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, commander-in-chief of the German Navy, in overall command of German military forces in the north, and at that tense moment engaged in arranging sea and other transportation for the masses of refugees fleeing from the eastern areas. To his overwhelming

*. Dr. M. Nazrul Islam is Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, Dhaka - 1000

** Tashdique Mannan, a Masters graduate of the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, and a researcher.

astonishment, Dönitz had been designated by Hitler as his successor and head of state. In his last political testament executed at 4:00 a.m. on 29 April 1945, and witnessed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, and Generals Wilhelm Burgdorf and Hans Krebs, Adolf Hitler appointed Grand Admiral Dönitz as "President of the Reich and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces ... by virtue of my statement in the Reichstag on September 1st, 1939 ..."¹ To capture the spirit of Hitler's political testament, I cite the following excerpts:

"... I die with a happy heart, aware of the immeasurable deeds and achievements of our soldiers at the front, our women at home, the achievements of our farmers and workers and the work, unique in history, of our youth who bear my name.... From the sacrifice of our soldiers and from my own unity with them unto death, will in any case spring up in the history of Germany, the seed of a radiant renaissance of the National Socialist movement and thus of the realization of a true community of nations.... I beg the heads of the Armies, the Navy and the Air Force to strengthen by all possible means the spirit of resistance of our soldiers in the National Socialist sense ... our task, that of continuing the building of a National Socialist State, represents the work of the coming centuries, which places every single person under an obligation always to serve the common interest and to subordinate his own advantage to this end. I demand of all Germans, all National Socialists, men, women and all the men of the Armed Forces, that they be faithful and obedient unto death to the new government and its President ..."²

At his headquarters in Ploen on the evening of 30 April 1945, Dönitz received only the following message: "The Führer has appointed you, Herr Admiral, as his successor in place of Reichsmarschall Goering. Confirmation in writing follows. You are hereby authorized to take any measures which the situation demands. -- Bormann."³

In his Memoirs, Dönitz describes his reactions:

"This took me completely by surprise. Since July 20, 1944, I had not spoken to Hitler at all except at some large gathering. ... I had never received any hint on the subject from anyone else.... I assumed that Hitler had nominated me because he wished to clear the way to enable an officer of the Armed Forces to put an end to the war. That this assumption was incorrect I did not find out until the winter of 1945-46 in Nuremberg, when for the first time I heard the provisions of Hitler's will.... When I read the signal I did not for a moment doubt that it was my duty to accept the task ... it had been my constant fear that the absence of any central authority would lead to chaos and the senseless and purposeless sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of lives ... I realized ... that the darkest moment in any fighting man's life, the moment when he must surrender unconditionally, was at hand. I realized, too, that my name would remain forever associated with the act and that hatred and distortion of facts would continue to try and besmirch my honor. But duty demanded that I pay no attention to any such considerations. My policy was simple -- to try and save as many lives as I could ..."⁴

Karl Dōnitz - His Life and Military Career

Who, then actually was Karl Dōnitz? It would be appropriate to trace the story of his life and military career before proceeding to the details of his accession to the leadership of the Third Reich. It would be immensely beneficial to understand the insight of the man who led his country at such a crucial juncture of its history.

First of all, the question can be asked, "Why Dōnitz?" To look for the answer, we have to go deep into the roots of the influence of the German military forces in the Second World War and, to be more specific, the role of the German Navy which Karl Dōnitz headed in the last two years of the war.

As one of the most significant innovators and advocates of submarine warfare, Dōnitz established tactics and procedures that were adopted around the world. Born on September 16, 1891, in Grunau, near Berlin, Dōnitz became interested in the military at an early age and in 1910 entered the Imperial German Navy's training school. He gained a commission in 1913 and served with the German surface fleet before joining the newly formed submarine, or U-boat, service in October 1916. After serving aboard the U-68 as a watch officer, Dōnitz assumed command of the boat. During a night attack against a British convoy on October 4, 1918, escort vessels sank the U-68 and captured Dōnitz and most of his crew.

After his repatriation in 1919, Dōnitz was one of the few officers retained in the small German navy allowed by the terms of the Versailles Treaty. Because the armistice forbade a German submarine force, Dōnitz served in a succession of surface commands during the post-war years. With the rise of Hitler and his "Z Plan" of immediate naval expansion, which included submarines, Dōnitz returned to the U-boats. On September 27, 1935, the naval commander in chief, Admiral Erich Raeder, ordered Dōnitz to rebuild and command the new U-boat fleet.

When Dōnitz assumed command, the Germans had no submarines, crews, operational manuals, or tactical doctrine. Relying on his personal experience and his study of emerging submarine strategy from other countries, Dōnitz literally "wrote the book" on German submarine warfare. In addition to overseeing boat design, including weapons and propulsion systems to increase speed and range, Dōnitz personally wrote crew-training manuals. He also devised the two primary concepts of U-boat doctrine. Dōnitz determined, and convinced his superiors, that the primary targets of U-boats should be merchant vessels rather than warships in order to cut enemy supply lines. His second concept, one that would revolutionize submarine warfare, was that U-boats should deploy and fight in groups or teams that he called "wolf packs."

Having to compete with the surface navy and the army for the limited German steel resources slowed Dōnitz's objective of establishing a three hundred-boat submarine fleet. When World War II began, on September 1, 1939, Dōnitz had a mere fifty-six U-boats, only twenty-two of which were capable of operating in the open Atlantic. Dōnitz had to deal not only with a limited fleet but also with the conventional restrictions of having to warn potential targets before firing to allow crews to evacuate. Even so, his U-boats sank 114 merchant vessels in the last four months of 1939.

Launching more submarines as resources became available, Dönitz focused on isolating Great Britain from resupply by sea and also supported German amphibious operations. In August 1940, Hitler lifted his prewarning requirements, allowing Dönitz to proactive unrestricted submarine warfare. In a four-month period, the U-boats sank 185 ships totalling more than a million tons.

The entry of the United States into the war in December 1941 opened up a new, lucrative target source, for the Americans had no defensive plan for their convoys to England. In the first six months of 1942, the U-boats sent 585 U.S. ships to the bottom of the Atlantic, many only a few miles off the American coast. On January 30, 1943, Dönitz, now a full admiral despite never having joined the National Socialist Party (Nazis), became the German navy commander. In addition to his new responsibilities, he remained personally in charge of the growing U-boat force as it faced new challenges. The Allies, with their increasing number of men and improved weapons, gained the advantage on both land and sea.

Radar now detected the submarines, and the Allies broke the German secret codes, revealing wolf-pack locations. Dönitz attempted to counter the Allied advances with snorkel systems that allowed submarines to recharge their batteries while submerged and by continuing to upgrade engines and torpedo systems. These improvements proved to be too little too late. The German U-boats, which had nearly won the Battle of the Atlantic in 1942, were by 1944 all but ineffective in limiting cross oceanic shipping. Nonetheless, Dönitz, and his U-boats continued to fight, with 398 U-boats still operational at the end of the conflict. The U-boats' accomplishments had not come cheaply. Germany lost more than thirty-two thousand sailors and 781 submarines.

Dönitz's service to Germany did not conclude with the end of the U-boats and the navy. Hitler, before committing suicide on April 30, 1945, left instructions for Dönitz to succeed him as chancellor. A convinced Nazi, Dönitz enjoyed the total trust of Hitler, especially after the 1944 bomb plot involving army officers.⁵ The former U-boat captain immediately attempted to negotiate a separate peace with the Western powers and bring the war to a close so as to minimize further casualties and to preserve some independence for Germany. His efforts failed, and on May 7, he authorized an unconditional surrender.

Dönitz remained the titular head of Germany for two weeks before his arrest as a war criminal on May 22. Although he had never joined the Nazi Party and several American naval leaders testified that they, too, practiced unrestricted submarine warfare, he was convicted of the rather ambiguous charge of committing crimes against peace. He served ten years with other German war criminals in Spandau Prison before being released to live out the rest of his life in retirement in Hamburg. He died of heart disease at the age of eighty-nine on December 24, 1980. Along with the decade in prison, Dönitz suffered the loss of both of his sons, who died in naval combat during the war.

Dönitz's Succession as Head of State and the Surrender of Germany

After receiving the message from Martin Bormann, Dönitz moved forcefully. He met with SS Chief Heinrich Himmler at Ploen and politely declined Himmler's

offer to become the "second man" in the Dōnitz government. Dōnitz ordered Field Marshal Keitel and General Jodl to come to Ploen so that the military situation could be assessed.⁶

On the morning of 1 May, Dōnitz received the following radio message, classified "Secret and Personal," from Bormann at the chancellery: "Will now in force. Coming to you as quickly as possible. Pending my arrival you should in my opinion refrain from public statement."⁷ Dōnitz was left to presume from the text that Hitler was dead but he knew none of the circumstances. Some public position had to be taken and immediately. He relates in his Memoirs that he felt that the announcement of Hitler's death should be couched in respectful terms: "... To denigrate him ... as, I felt, many around me would have liked me to do, would, in my opinion, have been a mean and cheap thing to do ... I believed that decency demanded that I should word my announcement in the manner in which it was, in fact, worded. Nor, I think, would I do otherwise today..."⁸ Consequently, on 1 May 1945 Dōnitz made the following announcement on North German radio:

The Führer has nominated me as his successor. In full consciousness of my responsibilities I therefore assume the leadership of the German people at this fateful hour. My first task is to save German men and women from destruction by the advancing Bolshevik enemy. It is to serve this purpose alone that the military struggle continues. For as long as the British and the Americans continue to impede the accomplishments of this task, we must also continue to fight and defend ourselves against them. The British and the Americans in that case will not be fighting in the interests of their own peoples, but solely for the expansion of Bolshevism in Europe.⁹

Dōnitz also issued his Order of the Day to the Armed Forces on 1 May, covering the same points in slightly different language. And, to counter a growing lack of discipline in the armed forces, he issued the following declaration to the military services: "I expect discipline and obedience. Chaos and ruin can be prevented only by the swift and unreserved execution of my orders. Anyone who at this juncture fails in his duty and condemns German women and children to slavery and death is a traitor and a coward. The oath of allegiance which you took to the Führer now binds each and every one of you to me, whom he himself appointed as his successor."¹⁰ It worked. As Dōnitz relates: "The next few days showed that the German Armed Forces had accepted my authority; and that was all that mattered."¹¹

On 1 May 1945, Dōnitz received a third and final radio message from the Berlin chancellery, with the same "Personal and Secret" classification but signed this time by Goebbels and Bormann:

"Führer died yesterday, 1530 hours. In his will dated April 29 he appoints you as President of the Reich, Goebbels as Reich Chancellor, Bormann as Party Minister, Seyss-Inquart as Foreign Minister. The will, by order of the Führer, is being sent to you and to Field Marshal Schoerner and out of Berlin for safe custody. Bormann will try to reach you today to explain the situation. Form and timing of announcement to the Armed Forces and the public is left to your discretion. Acknowledge."¹²

That night, Dönitz broadcast this news to the world and announced that he would "continue to wage war on the British and Americans in so far as and so long they hinder me in the prosecution of the fight against Bolshevism." He realised that there was no hope of his negotiating a separate peace with the Western Powers alone, but his policy was to maintain the front in the East so that the greatest number of German troops could surrender to Eisenhower's forces and thus avoid passing into the hands of the Russians as prisoners of war.¹³

In a melodramatic series of events, Martin Bormann was killed in Berlin en route to Admiral Dönitz, other ranking officials failed to arrive, and no copies of the pertinent documents ever reached Dönitz. Apparently it never occurred to the officials in the beleaguered chancellery that the entire texts of the pertinent documents could have been radioed to Dönitz. At this point, he did not even know of the subsequent suicide of Goebbels on 1 May. Dönitz correctly felt that he must make his own governmental appointments in order to function at all. He could not logically appoint officials whose whereabouts he did not know (he did not in fact know whether they were alive or dead), or whose prominence in the Hitler government might prejudice negotiations with the Allies. Of this fateful date, 1 May 1945, Dönitz summarized the situation in his Memoirs: "... while out at sea transports filled with wounded, with refugees and with troops hurried westward, the columns of refugees fleeing overland pressed on towards their salvation and the armies in Pomerania, in Brandenburg and in Silesia continued to retire in the direction of the Anglo-American demarcation line."¹⁴

It was the plan of Admiral Dönitz to accomplish a partial surrender in the west. For this purpose, the officer commanding at Hamburg was ordered to dispatch an officer with flag of truce to the British on 3 May, to offer the surrender of Hamburg and to inform them that a general delegation under Admiral von Friedeburg was en route to confer with them. Meanwhile, because of British advances, Dönitz moved his headquarters and seat of government to Muerwik near Flensburg. There he conferred with representatives of the German forces still in being and advised them to take such action as would enable them to surrender to American rather than Russian forces.

The process of piecemeal capitulation of the German forces in Europe had begun while Hitler was still alive. The first move was made in Italy, in acknowledgement of the crushing defeat which British General Harold Alexander had inflicted on the Germans there during April. At Caserta, on the 29th, an armistice was signed by Wolff, now acting as plenipotentiary for the C.-in-C., South-West, von Veitinghoff. Fighting on this front came to an end on May 2nd. Meanwhile, on April 30th, a German emissary had arrived in Stockholm to report that the C.-in-C., North-West (Field marshal Busch), would surrender the forces in his command, as soon as the British had advanced from the Lower Elbe to the Baltic and thus sealed off Schleswig-Holstein and the Danish Peninsula from Soviet penetration. This military prerequisite was quickly fulfilled. Montgomery's troops had crossed the Elbe near Lüneburg on April 29th and in the first two days of May, British and American columns drove North to Lübeck and Wismar on the Baltic, forestalling the Red Army by a mere twenty-four hours.¹⁵

On 4 May, Dōnitz gave to Admiral von Friedeburg the full authorization to accept various terms of surrender offered by Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, and von Friedeburg was flown to British headquarters with the further instructions to then proceed to General Eisenhower at Rheims to offer a German surrender in the American sector. As Dōnitz put it, "The first step towards a separate surrender to the West had been accomplished without our having been forced to abandon German soldiers and civilians to the mercy of the Russians."¹⁶

On 6 May, Dōnitz sent Col. Gen. Alfred Jodl to negotiate with General Eisenhower, who rejected any separate surrender and informed Jodl that the Americans would be ordered to fire upon any German troops approaching American lines with the intention of surrender, even if unarmed. This, of course, was a direct breach of the Geneva Convention but that did not concern Eisenhower, who took his political orders from the Washington regime. Eisenhower demanded unconditional surrender on 7 May, but Jodl was able to win the concession of 9 May as the date for the termination of hostilities, thus enabling Dōnitz to continue moving troops and refugees out of the eastern areas.

The history of the formal signing of the instrument of surrender at Eisenhower's headquarters Rheims on 7 May 1945 is well known. There at last, Jodl and von Friedeburg, acting for Dōnitz, signed an instrument which provided for the unconditional surrender of all German forces on all fronts.¹⁷ It was signed in the presence of the representatives of the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and France. Dōnitz authorized the German delegates -- Field Marshal Keitel, Admiral von Friedeburg, and General Stumpff - to sign for the German Armed Forces. The ceremonies were repeated in Berlin-Karlhorst on 8 May at the demand of the Russians.

The final order of the German Armed Forces, issued on 9 May 1945, stated in part:

"... By command of Admiral Dōnitz the Armed Forces have given up the hopeless struggle. A heroic fight that has lasted for nearly six years thus comes to an end ... the German Armed Forces have succumbed to overwhelming superior strength ... Every German soldier, sailor and airman can therefore lay aside his arms with justifiable pride and turn to the task of ensuring the everlasting life of our nation ... To show obedience, discipline and absolute loyalty to our Fatherland, bleeding from innumerable wounds, is the sacred duty our dead impose upon us all."¹⁸

As noted by Dōnitz in his Memoirs: "I thought then, and I still think, that those words are both appropriate and just."¹⁹

The Dōnitz Government after the Surrender of Germany

The surrender accomplished, and the cessation of hostilities being secured at even the most distant outposts, Dōnitz turned his efforts to the processes of the government which he headed, a regime which had obtained *de facto* status from the Allies by their dealings with it. The legal complexities of the succession are dealt with in *Regierung Dōnitz*, by W. Luedde-Neurath, a work published in 1950. The author held that Hitler's nomination of Dōnitz as Head of State was unquestionably legal, and that its legality was in no way affected by the loss of

German sovereignty occasioned by Allied occupation. Under German law, the resignation of a head of state is possible only when a successor is named at the same time. This would, of course, apply to a self-termination by a head of state (i.e., suicide). When this measure is not taken, the office devolves upon the president of the Reich Supreme Court (Article 51 of the Weimar Constitution). An extinction of the function of head of state is therefore legally excluded.

The Act (law) of 1 August 1934 combined the offices of president and chancellor in the person of Adolf Hitler, and the German people gave its electoral approval to this in the plebiscite of 18 August 1934. Subsequently, Hitler found general recognition as head of state both in his domestic and international dealings. Furthermore, the same law expressly gave to Hitler the right to name his successor. This he did -- without any opposition - in his Reichstag declaration of 1 September 1939, naming Göring and Hess in that order. Subsequent events and instruments eliminated Hess (following his flight to England) and Göring (by Hitler's interpretation of Göring's attempt to take over Hitler's leadership in late April of 1945). Therefore, Hitler's political testament of 29 April 1945 (naming Dönitz as president and Goebbels as chancellor) took precedence and was the governing authority for the Dönitz government.

To his everlasting credit, Eamon De Valera, Prime Minister (later President) of Eire (Ireland), called personally on the German ambassador to Ireland to offer his condolences on the death of Hitler and his recognition of the new government headed by Dönitz. There is no doubt that, had time permitted, the exchange of diplomatic representatives with neutral nations could have been achieved. Dönitz headed what he felt was, and should be, a new German government in every sense of the term. He wrote: "... it was essential that we should create the requisite state departments within the framework of a central government. It was, however, also essential that we should gather together all our best experts in these various spheres, in order to be able to offer their cooperation to the occupying powers. Our primary task was to ensure for the German people the essentials for bare survival..."²⁰

The Dönitz government took form, then, to prevent famine; to restore communications, business and industry; to rebuild housing and obtain temporary quarters for the homeless; to try to hold the value of the currency and re-establish banking systems, and to aid the refugees and absorb the additional millions of Germans and non-Germans fleeing the Russian-occupied areas. The Dönitz Cabinet took office: Graf Lutz von Schwerin-Krosigk (Foreign Minister, Minister of Finance, and presiding officer of the Cabinet), Dr. Wilhelm Stuckart (Minister of the Interior and Minister of Culture), Albert Speer (Minister of Industry and Production), Dr. Herbert Backe (Minister of Food, Agriculture and Forests), Dr. Franz Seldte (Minister of Labor and Social Affairs), and Dr. Dorpmueller (Minister of Posts and Communications). All had held secondary posts in the Hitler government but all were essentially non-political men with bureaucratic experience and technical knowledge in their fields.

The choice of Speer was an unfortunate one as the man was a self-seeking chameleon and opportunist, although able in his technical fields. Speer at once initiated an internal campaign to convince the Dōnitz government to resign. As Dōnitz put it: "Speer was emphatic in his opinion that we [the government] should resign. But he thought that, as far as he himself was concerned, the Americans would continue to cooperate with him."²¹

Schwerin-Krosigk took a sounder view—that only the Armed Forces had surrendered, the German state continuing to exist with Dōnitz as its legal head. As Dōnitz himself remarked: "... The enemy themselves had recognized the fact when they insisted on my conferring plenipotentiary powers on the Chiefs of the three services, who were to sign the instrument of surrender ... I and my provisional government could not voluntarily resign. If we did, the victors could say with justification: since the properly constituted Government ... had run away, we have no option but to set up independent German governments in the individual zones and to allow our military government to exercise authority over all of them ... I should stay until I was removed by force. Had I not done so, then ... I should have supplied the political pretext for the division of Germany that exists today ..."²²

Next, a campaign against the Dōnitz government was orchestrated in the Allied nations, an ominous sign. Soon afterwards, he and several other senior German military figures were put under arrest by the Allies, and his government was dissolved. Grand Admiral Dōnitz then, on 23 May 1945, became another prisoner of war, and the staggering burden of responsibilities for the German nation was taken from his shoulders by jailkeepers. Treated correctly at first in the Allied detention center at Bad Mondorf, Luxemburg, Dōnitz had time to reflect on his long career and the events which had brought him to the situation which then faced him.

Later on, Dōnitz was sentenced to ten years of imprisonment in the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, and following his sentencing on 1 October 1946, Admiral Dōnitz served his time, bravely and without complaint, at the old Spandau prison in West Berlin. On 1 October 1956, Dōnitz was released, and the event was widely heralded in the world press. Following his release from Spandau, Admiral Dōnitz promptly went to work on his memoirs, the German edition of which (*10 Jahre und 21 Tage*) appeared in 1958, to be followed by an English and an American edition. In 1962, following the death of his wife, the Grand Admiral moved into a small bachelor's apartment in Aumuehle, a suburb of Hamburg where, surrounded by his naval prints and silver, he continued to write books and professional articles, receive old comrades, and correspond extensively with historians who sought his views. On 24 December 1980, he died peacefully in his 89th year.

An Appraisal of Karl Dōnitz

Dōnitz, not born into the class which then provided officers, joined the Imperial German Navy and served on the light cruiser Breslau in the Near East, 1914-1916. Thereafter he entered the submarine service, serving as senior lieutenant on U-39 and in command of U-68. After the sinking of his submarine off Malta, he was a British prisoner of war until 1919. He continued to serve in the navy of the Weimar

Republic, such as it was, and continued to rise through the grades as a surface officer. Bound by the chains of the Versailles Treaty, Germany had no submarines again until 1935. Dönitz commanded a destroyer, a destroyer flotilla, served on the staff of the Baltic naval forces, and commanded the cruiser Emden in the South Atlantic (1934) and the Indian Ocean. In 1935, he was selected to build the new submarine service. He became senior officer of submarines, and was an expert on strategy, developing the tactics used by the U-Boats in World War II, notably the "wolf pack" system which devastated Allied shipping early in the war. He rose through the flag ranks of commodore, rear admiral, vice admiral, and, in 1942, became a full admiral.

On 30 July 1943, Dönitz was named a Grand Admiral (German equivalent of Admiral of the Fleet, a five-star rank), and became commander-in-chief of the navy, replacing Grand Admiral Erich Raeder. This has been an extremely abbreviated summary of the naval service of Dönitz. Suffice it to say that he was, without a doubt, the most brilliant U-Boat tactician of all time. Submarines will never again play the major naval role they played in World War II. The American Admiral Thomas C. Hart (commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet at the outbreak of World War II, and later a U.S. Senator) wrote:

*"I rate Admiral Dönitz as the best of them all, land or sea. He was unique in his handling of the German submarines and they were our most dangerous enemy. His performance with them-and he did most of it himself-was the most outstanding Axis performance of the war. Then he succeeded to command all German Navy Forces. It was too late for real accomplishment, but he made no mistakes and no one could have done better. Then he succeeded the Führer himself, and his performance from there on seems to me to have been perfect. So I think Dönitz was the best."*²³

Karl Dönitz was never a political man, and he took but little interest in the wearisome struggles of German political parties during the Weimar era. But he was an anti-Communist, a conservative, a nationalist, and, above all, a patriot. The principles of National Socialism were bound to appeal to him. According to the Dönitz biography in *Encyclopedia of The Third Reich*, "Dönitz was one of the few convinced National Socialists among high officers in the Navy. He praised Hitler in speeches to his sailors: 'Heaven has sent us the leadership of the Führer!' On one occasion he told a cheering crowd in Berlin that Hitler foresaw everything and made no misjudgments ... Hitler, on his side, had the utmost confidence in Dönitz ..." ²⁴ Dönitz wrote that his relations with Hitler were always formal and courteous: "I myself never thought about receiving presents or money from Hitler ... he only called me 'Herr Grossadmiral,' and never by any other name. I welcomed it that way." ²⁵ In his *Memoirs*, Dönitz discusses Hitler's influence on other people, pro and con.

"I myself had often been conscious of this influence, and after spending even a few days at his headquarters, I generally had the feeling that I would have to get away

from Hitler's suggestive influence if I were to free myself from it. Further, to me he was not only the legitimate and legally appointed Head of the State, the man to whom I owed obedience, the statesman as distinct from the fighting man, but also a man of high intelligence and great energy ..."²⁶

What was Admiral Dōnitz like as a person? A gentleman of the old school, he was extremely reserved, a man of few words. He would reply to questions directly but briefly, and seldom expressed his personal feelings. He had a wry sense of humor, but was far from jocular. He had the ability to immediately see the crux of any problem and deal with it, without preliminaries. It was his natural tendency to find only good things to say about others, and in the absence of such, to say nothing. Dōnitz was a family man who did not care for mixing in society, and he often expressed his fondness for dogs and children. His submariners, officers and enlisted men, were the apple of his eye, and he felt closely bound to them. He knew personally as many of them as possible, particularly his U-Boat commanders. Naval personnel uniformly respected him and referred to him as "Der Loewe" ("The Lion"). British Admiral of the Fleet Sir George E. Greasy wrote of him: "... As a submarine Admiral whom I knew to be held in the deepest admiration and respect by Officers and Men of the U-Boat Fleet, I held Admiral Dōnitz in respect myself, and there is no doubt that he handled his U-Boat arm with masterly skill and efficiency. In return he was served with great loyalty."²⁷

Conclusion

Dōnitz was a brilliant U-boat commander and a visionary who could see the submarine's contribution to warfare. Although undemonstrative in public, he believed passionately in U-boats and felt genuine affection for their crews. His objective of sinking the merchant fleet of the British nearly brought Britain to defeat. He displayed great talent in his dedicated fight for resources, innovative tactics of using wolfpacks, his intensive training program and unique command and control system, of these innovations enabled him to maximize use of his limited resources in the optimum way possible to achieve the strategic and operational objectives in the theatre. He was also a master of operational manoeuvre and shifted his focus and his assets within his theatre to take advantage of allied vulnerabilities. His personal character traits served him well as he inspired trust and unparalleled loyalty from his subordinates. His operational thinking and practice of operational art throughout this campaign remain a relevant model of operational leadership. His innovations in submarine warfare, especially in the "wolf pack" tactic, became standard throughout all navies. Although nuclear power and weapons a decade later changed many of Dōnitz's tactics, the professionalism and spirit of the German U-boat fleet has left an indelible mark on submarine forces around the world.

Endnotes

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25. Ancell, p. 121.
26. Dönitz, *ibid*, p. 476-77.
27. H. Keith Thompson and Henry Strutz (eds.), *Dönitz at Nuremberg: A Re-Appraisal* (New York: Amber, 1976; second, revised ed. Torrance, Calif.: Institute for Historical Review, 1983), p. 115.