

*The Brink of Defeat: The Myth of German Success in the Battle of the Atlantic During The  
Second World War*  
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“The Germans never came so near to disrupting communication between the New World and the Old as in the first twenty days of March 1943”  
-Captain Stephen W. Roskill RN in *The War at Sea 1939-1945*

Much has been made of how close the Germans came to winning the Battle of the Atlantic during the Second World War. Churchill is often quoted as saying that U-boat attacks were “the true evil” and that the Nazis should have invested everything into the U-boat campaign.<sup>1</sup> Most popular histories point to March 1943 as the pivotal month when a total of 120 ships had been sunk equalling 693, 389 tons, the fifth highest month of the war.<sup>2</sup> It was at this time that the official historian of the Royal Navy in World War II, Captain Stephen W. Roskill RN, says the Anti-U-Boat Division of the Admiralty started to doubt the effectiveness of the convoy system.<sup>3</sup> His conclusion that this was when Britain came closest to defeat in the Atlantic is probably where the “crisis myth” originated. Of course, if a statement is repeated often enough it eventually becomes considered fact. This seems to be the case with the crisis of early 1943. However, a number of historians have questioned this

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<sup>1</sup>Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: The Hinge of Fate* (11<sup>th</sup> Ed., New York: Bantam Books, 1962), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>From all causes. Definitive figures for this period tend to be difficult to find. Some sources included losses from all areas, others included vessels that made it to port but were total losses nonetheless. Andrew Williams, *The Battle of the Atlantic* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd., 2002), p. 247. See also Nathan Miller *War at Sea* (New York: Scribner, 1995), pp. 243-44.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen Roskill as cited in Michael Gannon, *Black May* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), p. xx.

assertion. They determine that, while the losses in the winter of 1943 were significant, especially on top of the enormous losses of 1942, the Allies were never close to defeat in the Battle of the Atlantic.

Probably the most vociferous critic of this supposed near-defeat is Clay Blair in his two-volume *Hitler's U-Boat War*.<sup>4</sup> In Volume Two he suggests that in their rush to describe the "massacre" of ships in the fall of 1942, historians seldom examine the German casualties (sinkings and aborted patrols due to battle damage) for the same period. He points out that U-boats were able to mount attacks on only six of the thirty-five convoys that crossed the Atlantic Ocean during this period. These attacks accounted for a total of fifty-seven merchant ships - out of a total of approximately 1,700 - plus two destroyers totalling 343, 535 tons. At the same time, sixteen U-boats were sunk, an intolerable exchange rate for the Germans. Furthermore, he contends that this actually represents a decrease in sinkings per U-boat per patrol from the previous two months. During July/August 1942, U-boats sank .92 ships per patrol, whereas during September/October this rate had decreased to .78.<sup>5</sup> The rate continued to drop during the next two months.

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<sup>4</sup>Clay Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunters, 1939-1942* (New York: Random House, 1996); and Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunted, 1942-1945* (New York: Random House, 1998)

<sup>5</sup>Blair, *Hitler's U-Boat War: The Hunted*, pp. 48-9.

During November/December 1942, thirty-four merchantmen were sunk in the North Atlantic. However, only forty-three of the eighty-four U-boats that went to sea during this period sank anything, producing a sinkings per boat rate of .63 for November and .75 for December. In return, the Allies accounted for twelve U-boats. In the meantime, 1,159 of the 1,218 ships convoyed across the Atlantic reached their destinations unscathed.<sup>6</sup> During the first four months of 1943, the Allies sailed approximately 2,400 merchant ships across the Atlantic: 1,320 in eastbound convoys to Britain and 1,081 in westbound convoys. Of these, U-boats sank 111 vessels, representing a mere 5% of the total. Furthermore, this included thirty-eight vessels on their way back to North America in ballast, and therefore not affecting the British import situation at all. Consequently, from the point of view of the British ability to wage war, 1,247 out of 1,320 - or 94.5% - of eastbound ships laden with war supplies reached their destinations.

Blair traces the origins of the supposed crisis to four convoy battles during the first twenty days of March - HX 228 and 229, and SC 121 and 122. In these four convoys, over half the March sinking were accomplished (39 ships). Regardless of the fact that these losses accounted for 20% of the convoys involved, during the same period eleven other convoys got through without incident, and a twelfth only lost one vessel. Blair accepts that such losses were serious, but he questions whether they constituted the "crisis of crises" depicted by Roskill in his official history.<sup>7</sup> Michael Gannon is another serious critic of the Crisis Myth.

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<sup>6</sup>Blair, pp.134-5.

<sup>7</sup>Blair, p. 169.

In *Black May*, his study into the defeat of the U-boats in May 1943, Gannon also holds Roskill to account for perpetrating the impression that the Germans almost won the “tonnage war” in the winter of 1943. He argues that, while the losses were serious, there was no justification for Roskill’s apocalyptic statement that “defeat...stared [the Allies] in the face.” He points out that American shipyards were producing more than enough Liberty ships to replace losses, and that 90% of all ships in convoys attacked by U-boats during this period arrived safely. He stresses that even the hard hit convoys HX 228/229 and SC 121/122 safely arrived with 82% of their ships.

Gannon states that he could not discover any documentation to prove that the Admiralty thought that the battle was lost. He points out that Roger Winn and Patrick Beesly of the Special Branch of the Admiralty’s Operation Intelligence Centre were actually convinced that the battle was going Britain’s way. He argues that during the period heralded as the darkest hour of the Battle of the Atlantic, 270 more merchant ships arrived safely in port than in the previous three months, more U-boats were sunk in February than in any previous month of the war, and in March 1943, ship construction exceeded sinkings by 300,000 tons. Gannon concludes that the impression given in Roskill’s history, and perpetuated in much of the historiography of the battle over the past fifty years, does not represent the true situation and should be “consigned overside in weighted bags.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Michael Gannon, *Black May* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), pp. xx-xxii.

One of the earliest scholars to call the March crisis into question was Jak Mallmann Showell in *U-Boats Under the Swastika*. First published in 1973, revised in 1987 and reprinted in 1988, Mallmann Showell's study demonstrates that the U-boat war in the Atlantic actually started to go against the Germans as early as late 1940 when the number of ships sunk per U-boat at sea started to decline. He suggests that during the first "Happy Time" in the autumn of 1940, U-boats were sinking 5 ½ ships per month per U-boat. However, there were only 10 U-boats at sea at any one time, and only half of these were ever in a position to attack. By the time the second "Happy Time" peaked in May 1942, U-boats were only sinking two ships per boat even though there were upwards of 61 boats at sea. He explains this by saying that, up to 1941, it was possible for most U-boats to make multiple attacks on the same convoy. From 1941 onwards, thanks to Allied anti-submarine measures, it was not possible to get into a shooting position more than once. Mallmann Showell further suggests that the high number of sinkings during the first part of 1942 occurred along the American eastern seaboard and were more a consequence of the United State's failure to protect its shipping than the skill of the U-boat Arm. As a matter of fact, Mallmann Showell argues that the diversion of the limited number of available U-boats along the eastern seaboard of the United States was actually a strategic blunder for the Germans. He contends that in 1941, the Allies already had "the winning hand that would ultimately defeat the U-boats." By removing boats from the North Atlantic battle in 1942 for easier hunting in the Western Atlantic and Carribbean, Admiral Dönitz gave the Allies the breathing space needed to prepare that winning hand. The Allies were able to perfect technology, increase the number of escorts, and improve training in time for the crucial convoy battles of the winter of 1943. By that time, U-boat numbers had risen to 116 boats at sea but the sinking rate per boat had dropped off to often less than a half ship sunk per U-boat. Consequently, the rate of

sinkings fell from over five ships per U-boat per month in 1940 to two U-boats per sinking by the winter of 1943.<sup>9</sup> In May 1943, the Allies put all their cards on the table, killing forty-one U-boats and forcing Dönitz to withdraw from the North Atlantic.

Canadian historians have also taken an interest in refuting the Crisis Myth. During the winter of 1943, even though the RCN only provided thirty-five percent of the escort groups, fully eighty percent of the shipping losses were in RCN-escorted convoys. Ignoring the fact that the RCN was escorting the most vulnerable convoys – the SC series<sup>10</sup> – and that it lacked all but the most rudimentary anti-submarine equipment, the Admiralty blamed these losses on lack of training and poor leadership and removed the RCN from the battle.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, any suggestion that the Allies came close to losing in the Atlantic during this period reflects poorly on the RCN. It is not surprising then to see Canadian historians exploring the issue. In his *Battle of the Atlantic*, Marc Milner suggests that the only way the Germans could have won the battle was if the Allies had made such “colossal errors as to defeat themselves.” He contends that thanks to a correct defensive strategy at the beginning, the British had the time needed to marshal their available resources. Furthermore, the Germans greatly underestimated the industrial power of the United States which, as previously noted,

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<sup>9</sup>Jak P. Mallmann Showell, *U-Boats Under the Swastika* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1988), pp. 21-2.

<sup>10</sup>After they were moved from Sydney, Cape Breton to New York in August 1942, the SC convoys were known as Slow Convoys due to the fact that they were comprised of ships that could not exceed nine knots. These convoys were the most vulnerable because their slow speeds prevented quick course changes to avoid concentrations of U-boats detected through HF/DF, intelligence or aircraft surveillance. The USN and RN escorted the faster convoys which were less subject to attack and had up-to-date equipment.

<sup>11</sup>Milner, “Squaring Some of the Corners,” In Timothy J. Runyan and Jan M. Copes (eds.). *To Die Gallantly*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, p. 132..

was replacing shipping faster than the Germans could sink it. Milner emphasizes that the Allies won the Battle of the Atlantic on all fronts - industrial production, intelligence, research, and command and control. He concludes that Dönitz's U-boat campaign greatly complicated the Allied war effort, but in the end had no major influence on the Allies' ultimate victory over the Third Reich.<sup>12</sup>

British historian Geoffrey Till is another scholar who doubts whether the Germans ever could have won the Battle of the Atlantic. In his essay "The Battle of the Atlantic as History" Till suggests that the Battle of the Atlantic has to be looked at on three levels: the Macro-industrial level, the Grand Strategic level, and the Operational and Tactical level.<sup>13</sup> From the Macro-industrial point of view, Till suggests several reasons as to why the Germans could not have won the Battle of the Atlantic. He points to the British reduction of imports from 60 to 26 million tons a year and the effective management of shipping as two factors, but argues that it was the industrial capacity of the United States that perhaps made the biggest difference. Till observes that between 1940 and 1945, the US built twice as much shipping as the Germans sank. Even with the supposed "crisis" of the winter of 1943, by that summer the Allies had a "generous amount of shipping."<sup>14</sup>

Looking at the Grand Strategic level, Till presents a number of arguments as to why the Germans could not have won in the Atlantic. Firstly, the Germans did not concentrate on U-boats early enough. Up until the spring of 1941, there were never more than a dozen U-boats in the

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<sup>12</sup>Marc Milner, *The Battle of the Atlantic* ( St. Catharine's, ON: Vanwell Publishing, 2003), pp.235-236.

<sup>13</sup>Geoffrey Till, "The Battle of the Atlantic as History," *The Battle of the Atlantic 1939-1945: The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary International Naval Conference*, Stephen Howarth and Derek Law, eds. (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1994), pp 584-595.

<sup>14</sup>Till, "The Battle of the Atlantic as History," p. 586.

Atlantic at any one time. As a result, Dönitz's wolfpack attacks "developed slowly enough for the British to take effective countermeasures."<sup>15</sup> Till suggests that this was compounded by Dönitz's error in emphasizing quantity rather than quality when it came to his U-boats. As a number of historians have pointed out, Second World War U-boats "were only marginally better than their World War I predecessors."<sup>16</sup> Till also contends that German strategy was too continental and compares the German and British views on the battle. He points out that it was not until Dönitz became head of the *Kriegsmarine* that U-boat construction became a priority. Furthermore, Hitler continually diverted U-boats from what Dönitz considered the main battleground - the North Atlantic - to support army operations in other theatres. The British, however, recognized that the North Atlantic battle was vital to the war effort. As a maritime power, Britain recognized its "fundamental strategic vulnerability." The German command, other than Dönitz perhaps, did not seem to realize that it was the sea that tied the Allied powers together, and if they could keep the sea lanes open, they would win the war. The last argument Till discusses is that the Germans built the wrong kind of navy, relying too much on one weapons system - the U-boat.

Some historians argue that the Germans would have had a better chance at winning the battle of the Atlantic had they possessed the balanced fleet envisioned in Admiral Eric Raeder's Z-Plan. Till disputes this by referring to the sorties by the German surface fleet during the early part of the war. Even at that stage, when the Royal Navy was scrambling to maintain all its commitments, and

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<sup>15</sup>Marc Milner, as quoted in Till, "The Battle of the Atlantic as History, p. 589. See also Marc Milner, "The Battle of the Atlantic," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, March 1990.

<sup>16</sup>Mallmann Showell, *U-Boats Under the Swastika*, p. 98. See also David Syrette, *The Defeat of the German U-Boats* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina, 1994), p. 261.

the *Kriegsmarine* roamed both the North and South Atlantic, they were not handled aggressively, often avoiding encounters with even inferior forces. Till says mines were a bigger threat than the surface fleet and, in fact, sank more ships than did Dönitz's U-boats.

Popular wisdom has been that the Germans almost won the Battle of the Atlantic during the Second World War. March 1943 has often been cited as the point at which the trans-Atlantic convoy routes were almost severed and the Admiralty in London despaired that their only defence against the U-boats -the convoy - had failed. The origins of this "crisis myth" can be traced to the official history of the Royal Navy during World War II by Captain Stephen Roskill.<sup>17</sup> However, the fact of the matter is that the U-boats never did come close to defeating the Allies in the Atlantic. Some historians dispute whether they ever could. The Germans started the war with an insufficient number of U-boats, and even when sufficient numbers were available, most trans-Atlantic convoys got through safely. All critics of the myth point to the industrial might of the United States as an important factor in the Allied victory in the Atlantic. The Germans could not hope to sink as many ships as American shipyards could produce. Nor could they compete with Allies technologically, as time and time again American or British scientist developed increasingly efficient sensors and weapons to detect and destroy the U-boats. Ultimately, the U-boats were driven out of the North Atlantic and Dönitz's strategy became defensive rather than offensive. For the last two years of the war, the U-boats main purpose was to tie down Allied forces and slow the supply of war material to Europe. From this point of view, the U-boats were successful right up to the end of the war, but they never came close to winning the Battle of the Atlantic.

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<sup>17</sup>Stephen Roskill, *The War at Sea 1939-1945* (3 vols, London: HMSO, 1956).

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