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OPERATION WESERUEBUNG: A NECESSARY EVIL?
AN OPERATIONAL ART ANALYSIS

The contents of this paper are my own views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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ABSTRACT

OPERATION WESERUEBUNG: A NECESSARY EVIL?

An Operational Art Analysis

Military historians have hailed the German conquest of Norway as a masterful exercise of German military efficiency and have given the operation a special place in the annals of war. The German Military's conducted of Operation Weseruebung is heralded as the first successful major joint operation which incorporated air, land, and sea forces. The occupation of Norway brought Germany several strategic and operational advantages, however, some of these gains appeared better on paper than in reality.

The necessity to conduct Operation Weseruebung and occupy Norway is critically examined from an operational art perspective, with particular emphasis on operational factors. After a review of the strategic setting, the paper provides a review of the conduct of Operation Weseruebung. Analysis of the operation demonstrates that consideration of the operational factors diminished after the invasion of Norway. An analysis will be presented of the post invasion actions of the German military relating to operational factors. Alternative courses of action are presented as options for attaining the same objectives.

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INTRODUCTION

"Should war break out, one of my first moves would be the invasion of Sweden, for we cannot abandon the Scandinavian countries to Russian or British influence"¹

Adolph Hitler, 1934

A close review of this quote allows the reader to capture the essence of Adolph Hitler's thoughts towards Scandinavia and Norway in particular during the period 1939 through 1945. His persistent belief that the British would occupy and mount offensive actions against Germany through Norway permeated his thoughts and influenced his decisions throughout World War II.

Military historians have hailed the German conquest of Norway as a masterful exercise of German military efficiency and have given the operation a special place in the annals of war. Their successful integration of air, land, and sea forces are recognized as the initial successful venture of joint warfare.

"The art of warfare at all levels is to obtain and maintain freedom of action. At the operational and strategic levels this is primarily achieved by properly balancing operational factors of space, time, and forces."² In planning Operation *Weseruebung*, the Germans carefully considered these factors and were successful in achieving their objectives. Yet, once the occupation was complete, consideration of those same factors waned, resulting in a substantial investment of resources being committed for questionable gains. While the occupation of Norway brought Germany several strategic and operational advantages, some of the advantages appeared better on paper than in reality. This paper, by analyzing the results of Operation *Weseruebung*, will examine the necessity for Germany to have executed the operation.

The analysis will begin with a strategic setting and a summary of Operation *Weseruebung* concluding with the withdrawal of allied forces on 10 June 1940.

This paper will analyze the beneficial and detrimental results of Operation *Weseruebung* from an operational art perspective with particular emphasis on operational factors. Alternative

courses of action will be considered for merit in achieving the objectives that predicated *Weseruebung*. Finally, conclusions as to the necessity of *Weseruebung* will be presented, as well as lessons learned that remain relevant today.

Given today's complex, joint battlefield, the experiences of the Germans provide a clear illustration of the importance of operational factors in the planning of future campaigns/operations.

STRATEGIC SETTING

*"The British would not abandon their strategic aim of cutting off the German ore imports and, to accomplish that, they would begin by invading Norwegian territorial waters. The Scandinavian area had become a decisive sphere of interest for both belligerents and would remain a permanent seat of unrest."*³

--Adolph Hitler. After Russo-Finnish
armistice, March, 1940

At the beginning of World War II, the Scandinavian countries declared their neutrality. Initially both the Germans and Allies recognized this neutrality, yet the strategic importance of the Scandinavian Peninsula was apparent to both Germany and Britain. Germany needed Sweden's iron ore desperately; Germany's war industry would virtually collapse without it. Hitler deemed that the continued uninterrupted supply of iron ore was vital to the final outcome of the war.⁴ In the summer months, Germany drew the ore from the port of Lulea, and in the winter, when the Gulf of Bothnia was frozen, through the Norwegian ice-free port of Narvik. (Figure 1) Approximately one half of the eight million tons of ore imported by Germany annually passed through the port of Narvik.

Given the strength of the British fleet, it appeared as though the interdiction of these shipments would be a simple task to accomplish. The complicating factor was the corridor along the Norwegian coast formed by the islands paralleling the coast. The water between the islands and the coast was neutral water, through which German vessels could pass. As long as Norway

remained neutral, German ships would be able to travel along the coast, breaking out at any point into the Atlantic.

Additionally, the Germans had not forgotten the 'hunger blockade' that had been placed on them by Britain in World War I. The perceived poor showing of the German Navy in World War I was still vivid in everyone's memory. A popular theory was that the war at sea would have been much different if the German fleet had been able to escape the North Sea.

With the Russian invasion of Finland, Britain was poised to intervene to aid Finland. An ancillary result would be the control of the Swedish ore fields and the port of Narvik. This would cause a serious blow to Germany.

In February 1940, the German vessel "Altmark" with 300 captured British seamen was boarded in Norwegian waters by the British and the prisoners liberated. Hitler considered this a breach of Norwegian neutrality, and hastened the preparation for the operation. The plan developed to invade Norway was to be executable within four days of notification. The Russian-Finnish peace provided a momentary easing to the situation. However, in late March it was decided that *Weseruebung* would have to be executed eventually. In early April, to coincide with the new moon, 9 April was selected as D-Day. Operation *Weseruebung* was set in motion to achieve the following strategic objectives:

"Opening up a theatre of war which, while it lay outside the zone of immediate anger, yet possessed twofold importance from the point of view of our general conduct of the war. In the first place there was danger that Britain would seize Scandinavia and thereby, apart from effecting a strategic encirclement from the North, stop our imports of iron and nickel which were of such importance to us for our war purposes. Secondly, it was the realization of our own naval necessities which made it imperative for us to secure for ourselves free access to the Atlantic through a number of air and naval support points or bases."⁵

OPERATION WESERUEBUNG

"On many occasions in the history of war those very operations have been successful which went against all the rules of warfare, provided that they were carried out by surprise"⁶

Admiral Raeder, March 1940

At approximately 0500 on 9 April 1940, Norwegian neutrality was shattered. A German invasion force consisting of 8,000 personnel embarked upon naval warships landed at the Norwegian ports of Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, and Oslo. Three and one half-hours later fighter attacks began on the airfields at Fornebu and Stavanger. The Norwegian air force was taken by surprise and destroyed on the ground. Paratroop operations followed immediately. (Figure 2)

By noon, the Oslo area had been secured, and the first German transports laden with troops and supplies began to land. The two airfields were quickly put into use as advance bases to provide protection against British air attacks and to support ground operations. The airfield at Vaernes fell on the second day. It too was quickly turned into a forward base. By April 15, Oslo and southern Norway were in German hands. The total superiority in the air proved to be the crux of this swift outcome. Continuous daylight reconnaissance conducted by the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force) maintained a watch on the coastal waters of Norway, as well as the North Sea, to minimize interference from British Naval units. In an attempt to thwart the German advance, British and French forces landed during the period of 14 - 19 April in the Namsos area. This initial force of 900 was to make preparations for allied follow-on forces of approximately 30,000⁷.

By the time of the British landings, the bases at Oslo and Stavanger taken previously had been extended; the area around Oslo had been completely neutralized and communication between Oslo, Kristiansand and Stavanger had been established. German forces controlled the area from Trondheim north to the Swedish border. Remaining British pockets were located from

Dombass to Adalsnes, between the Steinkjer Pass and Namsos, and at Narvik, where the British forces had taken the town.

However, the Germans were able to regroup to the east, and reinforced by *Luftwaffe* aircraft now stationed at Trondheim, counter-attacked. Due to the air superiority of the *Luftwaffe*, and their ability to provide additional paratroops and supplies, the Allies were forced to withdraw, taking with them the Norwegian King and Crown Prince. On 10 June, Narvik was re-occupied by the Germans. With the surrender of the Norwegian division at Narvik that same day, hostilities ceased and the German occupation of Norway was complete. Norway would remain an occupied country until the German surrender on June 17, 1945.

The *Kriegsmarine* (German Navy) had suffered the only significant losses: one heavy cruiser, two light cruisers, ten destroyers, and six U-boats.⁸ The *Kriegsmarine* never recovered from the losses suffered in this campaign.

OPERATIONAL FACTORS

"I make decisions; I need men who obey".⁹
Adolph Hitler, 1940

The German success in invading Norway can be attributed to the successful application of operational factors. Operating within the parameters of clearly articulated intent, they were able to use the factors of time, space, and forces in various combinations to attain quick and decisive results. Through the use of mass, surprise and speed, the Germans were successful in applying forces against Norwegian weaknesses, and quickly gained control of the country and forced the withdrawal of allied forces. However, during the occupation of Norway, the level of attention paid to operational factors so evident in planning and conducting the operation were missing.

The Factor Space

Norway occupied a critical geostrategic position in the war for both Germany and the Allies. (Figure 3) Control of Norway would permit the Germans to threaten the Allies maritime operations along the SLOC's (Sea-Lanes of Communication) of Britain. The 1,200-mile long Norwegian coastline tripled the German's indigenous coastline. With the concurrent occupation of Denmark, it afforded Germany the advantage of a long base of operations against Britain. To prosecute this advantage, Hitler had directed the Air Force, after occupation, to ensure air defense and make use of Norwegian bases for air warfare against Britain."¹⁰

By occupying Norway, the vulnerability of Germany's right flank was diminished. It would preclude the experience of World War I when the fleet had been limited to operating from a short base of operations and was limited to the North Sea. Additionally, it would afford virtually unlimited access to the Atlantic and a threat to Britain. The northern fjords and airfields would provide bases for operations against the allied convoys providing resources to Russia. (Figure 4)

The vastness of Norway itself presented a dilemma for the German forces. Roughly, 1,100 miles in length, mountains, which divide the land, combined with distance to add to the remoteness of the land. Interior lines of communication were poorly developed due to the expense of building roads and rail lines requiring hundreds of tunnels and bridges. All industrial centers and 85% of the population are located south of Trondheim.

The diverse weather of the region had a direct bearing on limiting operational capabilities. Winter brought nearly four months of unbroken darkness. During the winter months the polar ice pushed down from the north, forcing all ships bound for Russia to make a closer voyage to the coast of Norway. (Figure 4) During the summer months, operational capabilities were enhanced exponentially during twenty-four hours of daylight.

"If the British go about things properly they will attack northern Norway at several points. In an all-out attack by their fleet and ground troops, they will try to displace us there, take Narvik if possible, and thus exert pressure on Sweden and Finland. Such a move, Hitler believed, could be 'of decisive importance for the outcome of the war'.¹¹ Predicated on this belief, Hitler opted to establish a defense along the entire coastline. With the limited mobility afforded by the terrain, a static vice a mobile defense would be optimal. However, the trade-off would be higher resource requirements. Accordingly, "Norway, which a reinforced corps had conquered, took an army plus vast expenditures of material to defend."¹²

The Factor Time

The objective of any defense is to provide time to allow for the renewal of offensive actions. The primary goal of the Germans in Norway was to maximize the time that the country could be held. The Germans needed to retain control of Norway to ensure a constant supply of the Swedish iron ore. A concurrent task was to maintain an offensive presence against Britain. They faced the dilemma of operating in a maritime theater against a superior naval force, yet maintaining a creditable threat.

Hitler proclaimed that "Every ship which is not stationed in Norway is in the wrong place."¹³ In response, the remaining battleships were soon dispatched to the Norwegian fiords. This positioned the majority of the German surface fleet to interdict the British SLOC's with the United States and Russia. In an attempt to ensure optimal longevity of his threat, immediately thereafter, Hitler issued orders establishing tight control over movements of capital ships:

"No capital ship was to risk action against an equal or superior ship; capital ships were to avoid contact if strong enemy forces were anticipated; no sorties to the Atlantic were to be allowed; movement of capital ships would require Hitler's approval; and no capital ship was to sortie if the British had an aircraft carrier in its theatre of operations."¹⁴

These steps served to preserve the fleet; retain a creditable threat to Britain and their SLOC's; and tie up additional British forces. Basing the *Kriegsmarine* in Norway provided shorter Lines of Operation (LOO's) to the target rich environment of the Atlantic. The time gained by the shorter LOO's allowed for a quicker response time as targets of opportunity were discovered.

From bases in Norway, *Luftwaffe* aircraft could extend their operational reach to all of Britain. (Figure 5) In return, this afforded the opportunity to observe any massing or movement of troop and fleets, increasing both warning and reaction time. However, the *Luftwaffe* anti-shipping operations were a failure. With the failure to defeat the British in the Battle of Britain, the high command had no plan for a prolonged conflict. Consequently, when an advantage against British shipping could have been gained, the necessary forces were not available; when the forces did become available, the chance of any decisive success had gone.¹⁵ Unlike space or forces, Germany had lost time that could not be recovered.

The Factor Forces

Force levels in Norway were a direct reflection of Hitler's conviction "that Norway was 'the zone of destiny', and demanded 'unconditional obedience to all his commands and wishes concerning the defense'".¹⁶ If Norway was to be defended; the commitment of forces would be large. With such poor interior lines of communication, a mobile defense was viewed as too risky. The defense of the long coastline against an enemy that possessed naval superiority necessitated a static defense. While less vulnerable, the cost in men and material was demanding, with *Wehrmacht* (German Army) troops totaling 372,000 in Norway at the time of Germany's surrender.¹⁷

The onset of the war in 1939 had caught the *Kriegsmarine* in the middle of a ten-year modernization plan, which would afford them a newer and more capable fleet than the British. The losses sustained during the Norway invasion had reduced their surface forces by fifty percent.¹⁸ In restoring these lost ships; the *Kriegsmarine* faced two dilemmas. First were the superior British forces; second was a battle for the finite resources within the military. To compound this resource dilemma, "The Navy had no standing at all. Not only was the Navy the least favored service because of Germany's long land frontiers, which forced her leaders to emphasize the Army and Air Force for defensive strategy, but in addition the entire War Ministry was disposed against it."¹⁸

The *Luftwaffe* was experiencing similar resource problems. The *Luftwaffe* lacked sufficient aircraft not only for attacks on shipping but also, and more important, to provide effective reconnaissance for the U-boats.¹⁹ German air operations against the British fleet and allied shipping were hampered by the fact that the *Luftwaffe*, in the course of its hurried creation, had so far entirely neglected to train any units for this type of warfare.²⁰ A poignant example resulting from this failure to interact: out of all the ships used in the convoys to Russia, less than ten percent were sunk by German forces.²¹

The integrated command and control so evident during the initial operation soon became non-existent. Coordination was relegated to what could be done at the lowest levels. Despite the best of intentions, and much liaison between the actual operations staff of the two services, on only few occasions did the teamwork bring success. The *Luftwaffe* could seldom furnish support on the scale the Navy required, owing to the increasing demands on its resources from all other theaters of war.²¹ This loss of command and coordination served to negate any advantages advance bases against the allied forces.

ALTERNATIVES

*"The time has come for action - but what action"*²²

General Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff

General Alfred Jodl, head of Hitler's operational staff commented, "The Norwegian coast gave us no strategic advantage against Britain, while the occupation tied down 300,000 men in order to protect our conquests, and these remained useless for the rest of the war."²³ In Hitler's mind however, the protection afforded to Germany's right flank far out-weighed the level of commitment. In light of these two perspectives, did Germany have any alternatives?

Discussions continue to this day as to the validity and necessity for Germany to have occupied Norway. The following alternatives are examined as possibilities in answering that question.

Germany Does Not Occupy Norway

This would have been very precarious to Germany since the British had developed plans to "seize key Norwegian ports, thereby denying access to the enemy."²⁴ If Germany had not embarked on the invasion of Norway; they faced the loss of iron ore from Sweden. Even a diminished supply would have a significant effect on Germany's ability to continue hostilities. In 1938, Germany imported twenty-two million tons of high-grade ore required by the blast furnaces in Germany. Forty percent of this came from Sweden.²⁵ The long lines of communication from Sweden to Germany would have to be protected in a maritime theater of operations against a superior naval force.

Not occupying Norway would have left Germany's right flank exposed. Germany would have been operating from a short operations base with external lines of communication similar to what they had experienced in World War I. This was a lesson that they did not wish to re-learn.

The opportunity cost to be gained from not occupying Norway would have been the increase in resources available for allocation. The forces and material used in the invasion and defense of Norway could have been used in other theatres. This is particularly evident in the case of the *Kriegsmarine*.

Germany Occupies Iceland

It has been suggested that the Germans did not go far enough to isolate Britain. Both sides saw the value of acquiring Iceland as an operating base. Iceland occupied a geostrategic position for both sides. Possession of Iceland would allow Germany to further envelope the British Isles. It would have allowed the Germans free access into the Atlantic. German acquisition of Iceland would have provided a base to extend their operational reach even further west to interdict Britain's lifeline with the United States.

The limited operational reach would have dictated the Germans to occupy Norway initially as a staging base before going to Iceland. In anticipation of this plan, the British staged a preemptive occupation of Iceland with a Brigade size unit on 17 May 1940.²⁶ Thus, even with the quick victory in Norway, it is doubtful whether the Germans would have been successful in occupying Iceland. If Iceland were occupied, support to the forces would have to be done exclusively by air. This was assured by the losses suffered in the battle for Norway where the Home Fleet's surface ships, submarines, and aircraft had inflicted such damage on the German Navy thus preventing them from assembling a balanced maritime force for several months.²⁷ The *Luftwaffe* was limited to one aircraft type possessing the operational reach to support Iceland without refueling, the FW 200. (Figure 3) Before other types of aircraft could be used, an

adequate infrastructure to support them would have to be established. This would further place a burden on the limited capabilities of the *Kriegsmarine* and *Luftwaffe* in support.

No 'Festung Norway'*

* 'Fortress Norway'

A third alternative offered employs an economy of force option. This option would be based upon the occupation of decisive points such as the populated areas, airfields, U-boat bases, the rail line from Sweden and the port of Narvik. The *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine* would be responsible for providing security for the ore shipments traversing the Norwegian coasts and performing reconnaissance to provide notice of any British plans of advancing. The *Luftwaffe* would interdict shipping in conjunction with the U-boats. The problem experienced by the *Luftwaffe* pilots in attacking ships would be negated, since the maritime traffic would be operating in a restricted area limiting maneuvering room.

The same physical constraints that the Germans had encountered would remain for the British if they had decided to invade. The terrain would slow the attack of any invader. Correctly analyzed by the British, "the landing of mechanical transport, artillery, supplies, and petrol is a matter which, even if we were not hampered in other ways would present considerable difficulty."²⁸ The key to implementing this type of defense would be to give the commander air, land, and sea assets to ensure the ability to launch coordinated attacks to get optimal results from offensive operations limited by finite resources.

This option is not without inherent risks. The major risks to be considered would be a possible reduction of the supply of iron ore since the entire Norwegian coast would not be

fortified. A reserve would have to be available to reinforce. A more proactive role would have to be taken by the *Kriegsmarine* and *Luftwaffe*, as the burden of protection would fall to them.

CONCLUSION

"I need more divisions".
Adolph Hitler, 1944²⁹

Operation *Weseruebung* had been an outstanding success in the application of operational art. In the conduct of the invasion, the Germans applied limited forces against the Norwegian operational center of gravity (troops), and decisive points to achieve a swift, decisive outcome. They maintained constant pressure through offensive operations to keep the Norwegians in a reactionary mode. They were able to shift forces to decisive points at the critical time. Yet, after the allies' departure, the Germans regressed to a warfare that harkened back to the western front in World War I. The static defense absorbed a large quantity of the limited resources available.

Hitler's most critical error lay in his decisions after occupying Norway. His actions were constantly based on Britain's intentions, not their capabilities. Hitler's firm conviction that Britain would attack him in Norway caused him to turn Norway into a fortress defended by nearly half a million men and the greater part of the *Kriegsmarine* surface fleet. This obsession influenced his options in the other theaters. Similarly, he failed to strike a balance between his ends and his means. He had boundless ambitions but was working with limited means. He had failed to adequately consider and plan for his anticipated endstate in Norway.

Germany had no option to refrain from action in Norway in some capacity. Their ability to wage war was dependent on the continued supply of iron ore to fuel their industrial base. They needed uninhibited access to the Atlantic to compensate for the British naval advantage. However, occupying decisive points with forces could have produced favorable results. The risk

associated with not defending the entire coast of Norway would have been offset by the flexibility afforded to allocate many of the resources to other theaters of the war. The mix of forces in Norway would have been sufficient to prosecute the threat against Britain and deter a large-scale invasion. The terrain limited their ability to initially land and sustain any large offensive action against the defenders.

Nevertheless, the German errors provide some valuable lessons. First, to conduct joint operations some type of workable joint doctrine must be developed. The invasion featured successful interaction without any doctrine, but with the passage of time, dissention between the services arose. The limited resources were not coordinated to obtain optimal use operating from Norway.

The same can be said for joint training. US military leaders must be able to balance joint and individual service related training efforts. While each service must retain a high level of expertise in service-unique evolutions, the ability to operate effectively in the joint arena must be developed. As shown by the Germans, they were successful in the short term without joint training, but their inability to operate jointly caused ineffectiveness in the end.

The importance of ably applying the operational art cannot be underestimated. It was Hitler's failure to effectively apply the concepts accurately that limited his options in defending Norway. In this case, he failed to balance the operational factors of time, space, and forces to achieve and maintain freedom of action so that he could employ forces at the decisive time and place advantageously.

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