

The Sinking of the Blücher: The Battle of Drøbak Narrows: April 1940

By Geirr Haarr and Tor Jørgen Melien, Pen & Sword Ltd, Imprint Greenhill Books, (2023).

Reviewed by Charles C. Kolb, Ph.D.

This book provides a detailed account of the sinking of the heavy cruiser *Blücher* during the German invasion of Norway in April 1940, as she and other ships sought to make their way up the long Oslofjorden (previously Kristianiafjorden, 1624-1925) leading to Oslo, the oldest city in Scandinavia, capital and most populous city of Norway. Its two authors tell us much more than just a contest of arms, and places this event in the context of why Norway was invaded, the key role the *Blücher* flotilla had in the planned and significant capture of Oslo, and the impact of her loss to the German strategy.

Geirr H. Haarr works in environmental project development and is a Norwegian living in Stavanger, the fourth largest city in Norway and significant port of call for cruise ships in southwest Norway and the home of the NATO Joint Warfare Centre and foreign oil and gas companies. Haarr employs his academic training, research skills and a passion for naval history to delve into regional activities of the World War II Europe. He has written four important books about naval warfare during World War II, notably *The Battle for Norway, April-June 1940* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010); *The German Invasion of Norway: April 1940* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books, Imprint: Seaforth Publishing, 2011); *The Gathering Storm: The Naval War in Northern Europe September 1939-April 1940* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Books, Imprint: Seaforth Publishing, 2013); and *No Room for Mistakes: British and Allied Submarine Warfare, 1939-1940* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword Books, Imprint: Seaforth Publishing, 2015).

Tor Jørgen Melien is a Kommandørkaptein (Ret.) (Commander SG) in the Norwegian Navy and has a Cand Philol degree in history from the University of Oslo. He served in the Coast Artillery, including Oscarsborg Fortress during the Cold War. Additionally, he served as Commander at Bolærne Fort and acting Commander at Rauøy Fort, all of these related to events described in the book. He later was assigned to The Defence Staff, at the Ministry of Defence, and at NATO SHAPE in Belgium. Melien was also Editor for the *Norwegian Military Journal*. Since 2008 he has been working as a historian and Research Scientist at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies.

Haarr's 2011 book, *The German Invasion of Norway: April 1940* (2011) focused on the actions at sea including Operation Weserübung (Unternehmen Weserübung) an event "shrouded in mystery, legend and flawed knowledge." Weserübung was the first combined German operation ever where air force, army and navy operated closely together. Troops were transported directly into battle simultaneously by warship and aircraft, and success required cooperation between

normally fiercely competing services. It was also the first time that paratroopers were used. The following days were to witness the first dive bomber attack to sink a major warship and the first carrier task-force operations. His narrative, based on primary sources from British, German and Norwegian archives, and included a collection of photographs, many of which were never before appeared in print. His is a definitive account of Germany's first and last major seaborne invasion, since Operation Sea Lion or Sealion (Unternehmen Seelöwe), Germany's code name for the plan to invade the United Kingdom during the Battle of Britain, following the Battle of France, would fail. One of the events in Haarr's book would become Haarr and Melien's new 419-page compendium, *The Sinking of the Blücher: The Battle of Drøbak Narrows: April 1940*.

The Sinking of the Blücher includes an "Introduction," "List of Maps" (a total of 20), 17 Chapters, Endnotes (pp. 359-383 with 583 citations), three Appendices ("Equivalent Naval Ranks, 1940," and separate tabulations of "Norwegian Forces" and "German Forces"), and a "Bibliography" (pp. 401-410 with ca. 300 entries). The Bibliography includes entries in Norwegian, Danish, German, English, and French listed under five headings: Public Archives (9 archives with more than 150 individual citations), Private Archives (6), Websites (8), Newspapers and Magazines (4), Miscellaneous Published and Unpublished Documents (17), and Secondary Works (114). In addition, there are 18 tables, 11 drawings, and 172 monochrome pictures spread throughout the text and appendices. The Public Archives include documents from the National Archives Kew (UK), Imperial War Museum (UK), Royal Navy at Gosport (UK), Copenhagen, Oslo (Norway), Freiburg (Germany), Marinemuseet, Horten (Norway), and the National Archives and Records Administration (US). Additionally, there are two separate Indices: "Persons," with 289 individuals; and "Ships," with 165 names. This information should tell the reader that the authors have searched for material far and wide, that their book is well-researched, highly detailed, and the contents verified. It is not an "easy read" and is top-notch scholarship. Your reviewer spent some time reading and fact-checking.

Brief Conclusion: this is a first-rate history that includes multiple perspectives on what on the surface would seem to be a minor incident of early World War II history. This event is more than just the sinking of a Nazi German Capital ship, or The Battle of Drøbak Narrows (aka Sound), or even Germany's "Operation W" (Weserübung) the bold assault on Denmark and Norway (9 April-10 June 1940) -- Germany's first Wehrmacht combined operations attack (Kriegsmarine, Luftwaffe, and Heer, e.g. naval, air force, and army) -- which was tactically successful in most regards. Arrogance, unfortunate planning, and poor judgment plus a festering breach between the Heer and Kriegsmarine contributed to issues between the two services, coupled with remarkable Norwegian resistance and "luck," played roles in some British and Norwegian successes in despite German advances into Scandinavia.

The first three chapters provide important context for the others starting with a discussion of the loopholes in the Treaty of Versailles, and the subsequent 1920 Washington Treaty. In addition,

there is a detailed description of the heavy cruiser *Blücher*, named for Gebhard Leberecht von Blücher, the Prussian victor of the Battle of Waterloo. The ship was the second of five Admiral Hipper-class heavy cruisers of Kriegsmarine (*Admiral Hipper* was the first), built after the rise of the Nazi Party, was completed in September 1939, and pronounced ready for service on 5 April 1940 after completing a series of sea trials and training exercises. She was armed with a main battery of eight 20.3 cm (8.0 inch) guns and had five main decks. The authors also report on her structure with 14 bulkheads, its engines and turbines, and provide a list of key officers. The Norwegians had declared themselves as neutral but the Winter War in Finland against Soviet Russia's 450,000 troops allied with Germany grasped the attention of the Norwegian people and its government in early 1940. The British recognized Norway's importance to Germany as a major supply route for the shipment of iron ore and lumber by railway from neutral Sweden through Norway to the seaport of Narvik then by ship to Germany via the North Sea avoiding the Baltic. The small neutral Norwegian Navy and merchant marine are characterized along with foreign merchant ships, including German, stranded in Norwegian harbors. The third chapter considers Winston Churchill and the British plans to lay minefields, the sinking of the destroyer HMS *Deptford* by *U-32* in Norwegian waters in December 1939, and the British seizure by HMS *Cossack* of the German naval tanker *Altmark* (with 300 captured British seamen) in February 1940 in Norwegian waters. The Russian breakthrough of Finnish defenses in early 1940 resulted in the Finns and Russians signing an Armistice on 12 March, effectively taking Finland out of the war. British war plans called for an Allied British and French invasion of Norway to neutralize Narvik and other strategic ports.

Chapters 5 through parts of 7 and 8 (pp. 71-116): By September 1939, Germany, relying on Norwegian neutrality, had not developed plans to invade Norway, Sweden, or Denmark. Hitler ordered the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Armed Forces High Command or OKW) to begin preliminary planning for an invasion of Norway. This plan, named *Studie Nord*, developed Operation Weserübung in two weeks. The authors emphasize that the Norwegian military officer, politician, and Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling who had visited Berlin, had no part in the planned invasion. This included an assault on Denmark and Norway, seizing Norwegian ports and the establishment of U-boat bases to control the North Atlantic. The British had met with Norwegian government officials and planned to invade Norway from 1-6 April (Plan R 4) but had logistical and weather troubles, as well as concerns about the Germans having established minefields along the Norwegian coasts. By 21 February, the Germans had assigned General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst to command the operation which was divided into Groups I to X, the first five of which had a total of five divisions of infantry and one of mountain troops, plus nine capital ships. Groups I and II, led by battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* and ten destroyers with 2,000 mountain infantry headed to Narvik, while the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and four destroyers with 1,700 troops were assigned to Trondheim. Group III: The light cruisers *Köln* and *Königsberg*, artillery training ship *Bremse*, fast attack craft (*Schnellboot* or S-Boot), two torpedo boats, five motor torpedo boats and the two auxiliary ships *Schiff 9* and *Schiff 18* with 1,900

troops were dispatched to Bergen. Group IV: The light cruiser *Karlsruhe*, three torpedo boats, seven motor torpedo boats and *Schnellboot* mothership *Tsingtau* with 1,100 troops headed to Kristiansand and Arendal. Group V: The heavy cruisers *Blücher* and *Lützow*, light cruiser *Emden*, three torpedo boats, eight minesweepers, and two converted whaling ships, *Rau 7* and *Rau 8* with 2,000 troops were sent to Oslo; Groups I through V were dispatched 7-8 April. On 9 April the Germans attacked unprepared Denmark by land, sea, and air. These actions are covered in great detail and review the effective use of minefields in three locations, the use of German airborne troops, diplomatic meetings between the British and Norwegians, the loss of HMS *Gloworm*, destroyed by *Hipper*, and the sinking by the Polish submarine *Orzel* of the German troopship *Rio de Janeiro* carrying equipment and supplies for Group III.

Chapters 7 through 13 (pp. 116-279) focus on Group V which headed north from Kiel on 7 April and the next day was near the Norwegian coast led by the heavy cruiser *Blücher* to begin the German invasion of Norway, with the objective of seizing the Norwegian capital of Oslo and capturing King Haakon VII and his government. In the dark (01:40 to 04:00) the German flotilla entered the inverted funnel-shaped Oslofjord leading to the capital defended at the south end by four small Norwegian guardships which had recognized the German ships initially as an “unidentified flotilla.” Norway had just called up its armed forces and new recruits but its shore defenses were undermanned and, in some cases lacked commanding officers. On 8 April, the first major defense was Oscarborg fortress, constructed on an island in the fjord ca. 1850, 600 miles south of Oslo which had obsolete equipment and a skeleton garrison; a planned minefield had not yet been laid. The major armaments were three 28 cm (11 inch) gun batteries acquired from Krupp in the 1890s and Bofors 40 mm guns for AA defense. Secondary Norwegian coastal batteries included 57 mm (2.24 in) pieces at Husvik and three 15 cm (5.9 in) guns at Kopås Battery on the eastern side of the fjord. In addition, the Kaholmen battery had three land based underwater torpedo tunnels which could fire six torpedoes without reloading and had nine torpedoes ready for use.

Chapter 8 includes information on the dispositions of Groups I through V; Chapter 9 (“Guns of Oscarborg”) describes the defense of the capital, and Chapters 10 and 11 (“Trespassing” and “Intruders” describe the battle while Chapter 12 (“Improvisations”) reviews the immediate aftermath. *Blücher* leading the force toward Oslo was engaged by the Norwegian Krupp guns hitting midship and a forward gun turret, penetrating the ship and exploded inside a magazine setting fires, and severing the electrical center for the ship’s main guns. The batteries at Husvik and Kopås next opened fire and suppressed the small weapons on *Blücher* but she damaged the Husvik battery in return although the batteries knocked out her fire-fighting system. At this point she was still sailing northward although burning and severely damaged and came into range of the torpedo batteries which launched two 40-year old Whitehead torpedoes of Austro-Hungarian manufacture which struck below the waterline below the forward turret and amidships blowing out bulkheads and destroying her engines. Fires reach the ammunition magazine (05:30) and fuel

bunkers, sealing the fate of *Blücher* which turned upside down and sank at 06:22. *Lützow* fired at unclear targets at Oscarborg and the German ships stopped to rescue survivors among the sailors and soldiers; 913 survivors: 735 naval crew and 178 soldiers. There was great confusion as German ships offloaded the rescued sailors and soldiers at Son and other points along the Oslofjord, especially who was now in command as the flotilla was trapped between two Norwegian strongpoints and began to retreat southward. There were faulty assumptions about the presence of British submarines, and Luftwaffe He 111 bombers and Ju 52 transports soon arrived at Oscarborg and Oslo, which slowly came under German control. However the King, the Royal Family, and key government officials (a total of 461 persons) had already fled north by rail from Oslo and then to the North Sea coast to be transported to England by a HMS *Devonshire* and established a Norwegian government in exile (Chapter 13 and 14 “Oslofjord” and “Aftermath”). By 7 June, Germany controlled southern Norway.

The German invasion of Denmark (Weserübung Süd) with Groups VI, VII, VIII, IX, and X, was totally different than the taking of Norway in that 22 British and Polish submarines controlled the western Baltic and Skagerrak, and were able to sink 17 German ships, including several supplying troops in Norway, and damage *Lützow* (Chapter 15 “Homeward Bound”). Nonetheless, 100,000 Heer soldiers were transported to Oslo from Germany. The chapter details the results of British submarines HMS *Spearfish*, HMS *Snapper*, HMS *Seawolf*, and HMS *Sterlet*; three British submarines were lost.

Chapter 16 (“Requiem”) reviews the *Blücher*’s naval casualties 326, those of *Lützow* seven, and the demise of Luftwaffe crews, as well as the fact that German graves were moved during the post-war period. The *Blücher* wreck lies in Oslofjord in 60-90 meters of water just outside of Drøbak. Three propellers, two anchors, and 1,600 tons of oil were recovered in 1994, but the site was declared a war grave only in 2016. Oscarborg was repaired and now serves as a museum. While the sinking of *Blücher* in Drøbak Narrows was a major event in early World War II history, the blame for its loss has many components, in the main, a lack of training, a novice crew, selection of the wrong type of ship for the task, and Großadmiral (Admiral of the Fleet) Eric Raeder’ mistakes. Operation Weserübung was, the authors conclude, “more important for the development of World War II in northern Europe than is usually recognized.”

I believe that the authors make a solid case for their statement in this splendid assessment of the sinking of a major German capital ship, the politics behind the military operations, and the results of the sinking which certainly played a role in the Norwegian government’s ability to escape and establish a government in exile in England. The narrative is incredibly fact-filled and detailed, and includes quotations from the diaries of combatants who participated in the military or diplomatic events. The use of primary sources in multiple languages provides a comprehensive assessment. The excellent maps provide scales of miles or kilometers and are clear, uncluttered renditions of the regional geography and chart the tracks of the naval vessels.

The indices are unusual in that they cover only two topics (“Persons,” with 289 individuals listed; and “Ships,” with 165 names) so that *place* names such as Narvik, Oslofjorden, Horten etc., are not covered. Nonetheless, one of the best volumes on war in the European Theater that I have read in some time.

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