

# HITLER'S GRAY LADY

KMS SCHARNHORST REPRESENTED THE NEW AND MODERN GERMANY. SHE WAS A WARSHIP THAT STRUCK FEAR IN THE HEART OF THE ROYAL NAVY BUT WAS SHE ALSO A CURSED SHIP WITH NOTHING BUT ILL-LUCK?

BY KELLY BELL



Because the victorious Allies had destroyed Imperial Germany's surface fleet after the First World War, Adolf Hitler had no choice but to construct virtually a whole new navy after he came into power. This worked to his partial advantage since although Britain's massive fleet vastly outnumbered Nazi Germany's, its ships were generally older, slower, and more thinly armored than the sleek, state-of-the-art vessels of the New Order. *Hipper*, *Graf Spee*, *Tirpitz*, *Bismarck*, *Deutschland*, *Gneisenau*, and *Scharnhorst* took to the water barely in time for the war, and were too fast to be kept bottled up in the North Sea like their Imperial predecessors had been 25 years earlier by the very same British warships they would now face in this new conflict. German capital ships were at large in the Atlantic during wartime, and the Royal Navy was hard-pressed to bring them to bay while simultaneously dealing with the menacing packs of U-Boats.

Still, in many instances these "pocket battleships" failed to live up to hopes. This was largely because they were so few in number. Grand Admiral Erich Raeder's "Z-Plan" for building his surface fleet was nowhere near completion upon the outbreak of hostilities. Yet, there were also other, less prosaic, factors.

Captain Hans Langsdorff scuttled *Graf Spee* outside Uruguay's Montevideo harbor on 12 December 1939 rather than face a feeble British flotilla he believed was much more powerful than it actually was. England's Prime Minister Winston Churchill got



Hitler watching a naval review.



The *Scharnhorst*-class would be the first capital ships of Nazi Germany's *Kriegsmarine* and comprised *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* with *Scharnhorst* being launched first.

away with committing virtually his entire North Atlantic fleet to hunting down *Bismarck* without losing any merchant ships. While all the escort vessels were off hunting down and sinking their big sister, the other free-ranging German dreadnoughts somehow managed to not stumble across any of the lumbering,

unprotected convoys. *Scharnhorst's* star-crossed career was the most fascinatingly bedeviled of all.

At 32,100 long tons, she was lighter and faster than the older British battleships. Although her 11-inch rifles were smaller than the 15-inchers of the Royal Navy's *Hood*, *Repulse*, and *Renown*, she had much thicker armor. She was also fitted with a new device called radar, enabling her gunners to accurately shell targets that were over the horizon. Regardless,

KMS *Scharnhorst* and its stablemates became a terror for British shipping during the first several years of WWII.