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THE CASE OF OSKAR KUSCH AND THE LIMITS OF U-BOAT CAMARADERIE IN WORLD WAR II: REFLECTIONS ON A GERMAN TRAGEDY

Eric C. Rust, Baylor University

To his enlisted men on U-154, Lieutenant Oskar Kusch was the ideal skipper--bright, experienced, successful, caring, tolerably eccentric--a captain who always brought his boat home safely when so many others vanished in the vast reaches of the oceans.^[1] Little wonder that they nicknamed their boat "U-Sunshine" in appreciation of the professional yet easy-going ambience Kusch helped create and maintain.^[2]

To most of his officers Kusch meant something very different--a Nazi-hating fanatic given to lengthy lectures against the regime, a suspected coward and potential traitor, a mad prophet on the edge of insanity unfit for command. Early in 1944, after his second patrol under Kusch, his executive officer Lieutenant Ulrich Abel, a reserve officer with a doctorate in law and a member of the Nazi party, decided to turn him in on charges of sedition and cowardice.^[3]

In a hastily arranged court martial Kusch was sentenced to death on purely ideological grounds for "undermining the fighting spirit" of his command, even though the prosecutor only recommended a ten-year jail sentence, even though the fighting spirit of U-154 manifestly had never suffered as a result of Kusch's political views, and even though his military record stood out proud and unblemished when scrutinized by experts at his trial. Abandoned by all but his closest friends and relatives, coldly sacrificed by Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, unwilling to plead for mercy, and to the end ridiculed by a naval legal bureaucracy acting in collusion with the brown regime, Oskar Kusch was executed on a young May day in 1944. He had just turned twenty-six.

Details of Kusch's fate did not reach the German public until the early 1990s when historian Heinrich Walle sought to rehabilitate him with a scholarly documentation.^[4] His work at last moved authorities to wipe Kusch's legal record clean in 1996.^[5] Two years later the city of Kiel erected a memorial to honor Kusch and renamed a street after him adjacent to the military range by the Kiel Canal where he had been shot.^[6]

Far from bringing closure to the memory of Kusch's sacrifice and civil courage, Walle's book has fueled a bitter debate whose resolution appears nowhere near.^[7]

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One side, mainly veteran officers, believes Kusch was guilty of the accusations against him; that U-boat commanders in the midst of a war should not promote a political agenda even if they spoke out against an evil regime; and that Abel did the proper thing in reporting his superior if to him Kusch's opposition to Hitler seemed to endanger the combat readiness of his boat, no matter what the consequences might entail for his captain. For members of this camp, questions of honor, duty, loyalty, patriotism and military discipline remain central when judging Oskar Kusch.

His supporters, mostly younger officers and historians, insist that Kusch, as an exemplary and patriotic soldier, was the target of a personal vendetta by his disaffected officers and the victim of an unprecedented breakdown in U-boat camaraderie; that his activities, far from being criminal, aimed at the education of his officers rather than at treason or sedition; that his superiors deserted him even though they knew he was being offered up to an ideologically corrupt legal system; and that quiet removal from command and inconspicuous reassignment should have been the appropriate way of resolving the matter once it had been reported. The only thing both sides seem to agree on is that Kusch should never have lost his life.

Little about Kusch is entirely without ambiguity. Walle's documentation settles many issues of fact, but also confirms that facts require context and interpretation before they mean anything. Indeed, the Oskar Kusch who emerges from the record resembles less a systematic and heroic fighter for truth, justice and enlightenment, than the product and tragic victim of complex circumstances.

Born in 1918 in Berlin as the gifted only child of an upper middle class family, Kusch enjoyed a cosmopolitan upbringing which rejected the absurdities of Nazi ideology while celebrating the western liberal tradition mixed up with elements of romantic patriotism. Run-ins with Nazi authority when he and his formerly independent youth group were folded into the Hitler Youth in the mid 1930s bred in Kusch a deep disgust for the regime's representatives, their methods and their lies. His naval career after 1937 offered an escape into a world presumably untouched and untouchable by the brown hordes, a life that combined adventure, social respectability, professionalism, and patriotic service to the fatherland rather than to the mediocre men who had usurped the state. Kusch entered the U-boat branch early and excelled as a watch officer on U-103, Germany's fifth most successful boat of the entire war. Under seasoned skippers he not only mastered his craft extraordinarily well but encountered an atmosphere on board where open and broad political speculation was deemed acceptable and perfectly safe within the confines of the boat's officer quarters.

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Despite reminders from fellow officers to watch his tongue, taking command of his own boat U-154 in early 1943 at age twenty-four must have touched off in Kusch new ambitions, possibilities and perhaps illusions that ultimately doomed him.^[8] By all appearances he meant to run his own boat the way he remembered U-103, with a mix of professional excellence, a relaxed atmosphere for the crew, and opportunities for his officers to discuss the political and military situation frankly and frequently. He would strive to guide them away from Nazi myths toward critical thinking and independent judgment, assuming that educated officers would be swayed more by truth and logic than by party lies. All this would happen under the mantle of comradely trust for which the U-boat arm was justly known and famous.

The enlisted men of U-154 understood their captain instinctively, chuckled about his eccentricities, applauded his leadership, and rewarded him with excellent performance, loyalty and support to the end and beyond.^[9] Kusch's officers were the ones who abandoned him as comrades and confidants. What should have been minor irritants with regard to Kusch's political persuasions, became causes of deep disaffection until denunciation as a means of retribution and revenge surfaced as a distinct possibility.

Kusch's tensions with his officers must be viewed against the backdrop of Germany's declining fortunes of war, the crisis of the U-boat campaign, and the Navy's worsening personnel crunch. By early 1943, the "Happy Times" of 1940 and of "Operation Drumbeat" in 1942 were forever gone, the celebrated aces of yesterday either dead, in captivity or on the shelf, and of every ten boats sailing from their bases on the Bay of Biscay in the spring of 1943 fewer than half would ever return. By then the Axis powers had lost North Africa, were retreating all along the Eastern Front, endured frightful bombing of their cities at home, and could expect additional onslaughts on Hitler's mythical "Fortress Europe" soon. For Kusch these disasters demanded a reassessment and rearrangement of Germany's leadership, while his subordinate officers, despite daily and scary reminders of Allied superiority, remained caught in official propaganda, firmly clinging to the vision of a final victory.

No one will ever be certain why Lieutenant Ulrich Abel took the unprecedented step of turning in a fellow U-boat officer on charges of sedition and cowardice. Without informing his comrades or his wife, he did so on January 12, 1944, just back from his second patrol under Kusch to Brazilian waters and while attending a course for submarine commanders at a facility on the Baltic.^[10] Eventually Abel would take command of a boat of his own, U-193, only to be lost with all hands on his first outing in April 1944, ironically some three weeks before Kusch was led from his prison cell and shot.

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Abel stated he made his decision "after thoroughly considering all possible consequences," and that he judged Kusch unfit to command a U-boat because of "repeated and incontrovertible evidence of strong opposition against Germany's political and military leadership."^[11] However deeply he may have felt about these matters, apparently for Abel neither the officer corps' firm tradition against denouncing fellow members, nor the celebrated and still surviving U-boat spirit, nor solemn promises of comradely behavior, nor plain human compassion could outweigh his desire to rid the U-boat arm of a man who refused to equate military duty with endorsement of Hitler's regime.

Like Kusch, Ulrich Abel was a complex man, and Walle's documentation hardly does him justice by painting him as a heartless Denunziant and calculating accessory to a judicial murder. Kusch's senior by six years, Abel was a serious, self-made man who had obtained a doctorate in law and a position as a county judge after the Great Depression had cut short an earlier stint in the German merchant marine. His party membership may have grown as much from political persuasion as from professional opportunism. As a reserve officer Abel spent the first years of the war on minesweepers, mostly in the Baltic and in northern Norway where the war assumed a ferocity unknown in the struggle against the western Allies. Abel commanded the minesweeper M-1503 with remarkable skill. His nautical competence and general leadership abilities were beyond doubt.^[12]

Switched reluctantly to the U-boat arm in 1942, Abel underwent routine training before reporting to the 2nd U-Boat Flotilla in Lorient for duty as U-154's first watch officer.^[13] Why the personnel bureau matched a new skipper aged twenty-four with a new executive officer aged thirty-one, in addition to an inexperienced new chief engineer, remains a mystery. Abel testified that matters went sour from the very first day when Kusch had a Hitler portrait moved from the boat's officer mess to a less conspicuous location with the alleged comment, "Take that away: we are not practicing idolatry here." Abel's grievances list other disagreements, including Kusch's view that the Nazis were a disaster for Germany and the world, that Hitler displayed traits of a madman, that there was no such thing as a Jewish conspiracy, that an Allied victory seemed likely because of superior numbers and technology, and that messages from U-boat Command urging commanders at sea to take extraordinary risks resembled exhortations of a slave driver. Abel also claimed Kusch avoided contact with the enemy--a charge quickly dropped at the trial as unsupported by the boat's war diary.

Abel found allies in the boat's chief engineer and in its medical officer, a surgeon on loan from the army specializing in tropical medicine. At Kusch's trial they not only confirmed Abel's claims but added incriminating details and episodes of their own, perhaps to compensate for failing to report Kusch's activities earlier. Only

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his former skippers on U-103 took Kusch's side. They praised him as an excellent officer in every respect, but of course knew nothing about the incidents on U-154. Enlisted men were not invited to the trial even though their testimony would have been crucial for Kusch's defense. Since U-154 was still in Lorient preparing for its next patrol under a new commanding officer, their presence at the court martial, or at least a collection of affidavits, would have been quite feasible.^[14]

At least two other factors may have motivated Abel in his enmity toward his captain. Originally he was scheduled to make only one patrol under Kusch before qualifying for a boat of his own. Kusch's lukewarm evaluation after returning to Lorient in July 1943 resulted in Abel having to stay on board for a second mission, no doubt a harsh disappointment and an injury to his pride--besides the prospect of four more months of political sermons and personal hostility in the confined space of a fighting submarine. In addition, Kusch and Abel clashed over the nature of Allied bombing attacks against German cities. Kusch, anglophile and humanitarian, could not imagine the Allies would target civilians and insisted that any such casualties resulted from stray bombs originally aimed at military installations. Abel knew better. In the terrible raids against Hamburg his family had almost come to grief, he had lost many of his personal possessions and was forced to relocate his wife and young children under desperate circumstances to the relative safety of rural eastern Germany.^[15] For him, no clear moral gradations distinguished the enemy in the East from the enemy in the West, the war was simply a relentless struggle to the end, and Kusch's respect for the British and Americans, his habitual monitoring of foreign-language radio broadcasts, for example, must have filled Abel with loathing and disgust. It is also possible that the dramatic loss of the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* on December 26, 1943, in Arctic waters, which he knew well, and a particularly fiery address by his flotilla commander three days earlier, may have pushed Abel into a mood of deep hostility toward anyone who criticized Germany's political and military leadership.^[16]

If Abel triggered Kusch's plunge into the abyss, other officers besides those of U-154 became entangled in this calamitous lapse of U-boat camaraderie. Their motives seem to have ranged from outright agreement with Abel's views to indifference, embarrassment, opportunism, and fear. Why did Kusch's immediate superiors Fregattenkapitän Ernst Kals, in charge of the 2nd U-boat Flotilla in Lorient, and Captain Hans Rösing, commanding all U-boats in France, allow the case to proceed when with a little effort and imagination they could have taken it away from the legal bureaucrats and treated it as an internal matter? After all, they knew Kusch as a capable and trustworthy officer who deserved a fair hearing and could have moved Abel's temporary superior, Fregattenkapitän Heinrich Schmidt of the 3rd U-boat Training Division at Neustadt, to forward Abel's complaint to them rather than deliver it straight into the hands of the naval justice

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system. Also, why did they fail to review the case in detail and recommend a milder sentence once the verdict had been rendered? They did absolutely nothing, not once visiting or communicating with Kusch between his arrest and his execution. Nor does Abel seem to have invited more than his comrades' silent scorn when he returned to Lorient to take over his own boat while U-154 was already out at sea under a new commander. Abel also never advocated leniency for Kusch, even though, according to his written complaint, Kusch's removal from command had been his only objective.

Similarly implicated appear two other officers who acted as lay judges at Kusch's court martial in Kiel on January 26, 1944, under the overall supervision of Superior Navy Staff Judge Karl-Heinrich Hagemann. This is not an occasion to dwell on Hagemann who would be indicted and acquitted "for lack of evidence" in two post-war trials on charges of crimes against humanity involving the Kusch case and another wartime incident. But as fellow officers Wolfgang Dittmers and Otto Westphalen could at the very least have saved Kusch's life. The prosecutor's recommendation of a ten-year sentence, Kusch's fine military record, and the fact that his actions had produced no tangible consequences in terms of impaired combat readiness or reduced combat eagerness on his boat, should have created enough hesitation not to go for the maximum punishment. As they stated after the war with less than perfect logic, Dittmers and Westphalen thought Kusch's political views somehow must have endangered the fighting spirit of his boat while at the same time they expected the death sentence to be commuted in the review process.^[17]

Lastly, what about Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz, Commander-in-Chief of the Kriegsmarine, legendary founder and longtime leader of the U-boat arm, a man who all but personified the U-boat spirit and who on numerous occasions had shielded officers in trouble with the law from harmful consequences? Was Kusch's predicament not similar to other instances of *lèse-majesté* where the navy leadership, as in the famous episode involving Reinhard Suhren of U-564, had either shut their collective eyes or had handled matters inconspicuously with no or minimal ill effects for the offenders as long as they were not guilty of treason, cowardice, or desertion?^[18]

Days after the verdict, the skipper of U-103 and once a personal aide to Dönitz, Lieutenant Commander Gustav-Adolf Janssen, accompanied the Grand Admiral on a car ride through occupied France during which Kusch was the only topic of conversation. For hours Janssen entreated Dönitz to save his friend's life. Initially cold and defensive, Dönitz told his subordinate when they parted, "Janssen, I find it awfully decent of you to speak up on the boy's behalf. I will arrange for him to see me so I can have a good look into his heart. We will then

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take matters from there."^[19] Janssen was elated and felt certain that Kusch's life would be spared.

The faithful officer could not have known that Dönitz was playing a double game. Far from wishing to grant Kusch another chance through a new trial or a lighter sentence, he had decided that by having Kusch executed he would "set down an example," presumably in the sense Voltaire commented on Admiral John Byng's execution in 1757 as an act designed "pour encourager les autres."^[20] If Kusch were allowed to spend the rest of the war in jail, Dönitz argued in essence, how could he in good conscience order other commanders and crews to go out and face the enemy against ever-lengthening odds? Not what Kusch had or had not done became the central criterion in Dönitz's mind but the need to keep up the will to victory in line with the Nazi spirit. By this reckoning, Kusch executed became more valuable than Kusch incarcerated. Dönitz never kept his promise to see Kusch and listen to his version of events. He never called him or corresponded with him, nor did any other individual involved in the review process ever seek to meet with the lonely inmate of cell No. 107 at the naval detention center in Kiel. Naively or deliberately taking the trial record for a complete and unbiased account of what had happened on U-154, and allowing the myth to take root that the boat had somehow pulled out of the war under Kusch's direction, these officers sent the file routinely up the chain with their endorsements of the death penalty until it reached Dönitz's desk early in April 1944, some two months after his meeting with Janssen.

After the war Dönitz claimed he agonized for days over whether to impose the death penalty or not.^[21] Perhaps he had indeed second thoughts, but as late as 1968 Dönitz assured his former defense counsel at Nuremberg that it had been a "difficult but necessary duty" to have Kusch executed.^[22] Thus he passed the file to Reich Marshall Hermann Göring without reservations. Göring, acting in Hitler's stead because the latter had been a target of Kusch's accusations, confirmed the verdict on April 10, 1944.^[23] Shortly after dawn on May 12, Kusch was taken from his cell to a military range just north of the Kiel Canal and executed by firing squad.

The case of Oskar Kusch offers at least two important insights into the cosmos of the German U-boat service in World War II. First, the U-boat arm was not a blessed isle rising above the brown morass all around it, but, especially in the later phases of the war, its formerly fairly independent spirit was diluted and polluted by an ever closer affinity to the Nazi message as evidenced by Abel's report and how he justified it, by Dönitz's readiness to sacrifice one of his finest commanders to preserve ideological conformity, and by the way the naval legal bureaucracy's treated a worthy man as if he were a dangerous criminal.

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Second, the much invoked U-boat spirit was neither a hoax nor a myth. In this sense the actions of Janssen, Winter and the enlisted men of U-154, and up to a point even those of Dönitz himself, speak a clear language. Still, this spirit showed cracks, limitations and inconsistencies which are too obvious to overlook or to belittle. A future generation of Germans may be able to appreciate Kusch frankly and unreservedly for who he was and for what he died: as a courageous and enlightened officer who took his duty to fight the enemy as seriously as the obligation to seek and speak the truth no matter what the circumstances.

[1] This study was made possible in part through a research and travel grant by the University Research Committee of Baylor University, Waco, Texas.

[2] Oskar Kusch to Heinrich Lüdmann, U-154's navigator and senior petty officer on Kusch's first patrol, February 27, 1944; Bundesarchiv-Zentralnachweisstelle Aachen-Kornelimünster (BA-ZNS), RM 123/K 3140, assorted records (Handakten), Document 27. See also Lüdmann's letter to the editor in *Marineforum*, 10/1996, 26-27.

[3] A copy of Abel's report is attached to Kusch's court martial file, BA-ZNS, RM 123/K 3140, Untersuchungsakten (investigation records), sheets 1-2, 26-27.

[4] Heinrich Walle, *Die Tragödie des Oberleutnants zur See Oskar Kusch* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1995).

[5] A copy of Chief Prosecutor Hoffmann's annulment of the verdict against Kusch, dated Kiel, September 16, 1996, is attached in a separate envelope to Kusch's court martial file, BA-ZNS, RM 1213/K 3140.

[6] Landeshauptstadt Kiel Offiziell, "Strasse Am Schiessstand wird umbenannt in Oskar-Kusch-Strasse," web article dated March 3, 1998; available at: <http://www.kiel.de/presse/9833154537.html>; accessed July 7, 2001.

[7] The debate has been primarily but not exclusively carried out in articles and letters to the editor of the *Marineforum*, the journal of the German Naval Officers Association (MOV).

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^[8] Recollections of an officer who took a training course with Kusch in Pillau, East Prussia, circa 1941. Information relayed in phone conversation with The Rev. Thomas C. Rust, January 9, 2000.

^[9] See, for example, the recollections of U-154's chief radio operator Hans Janker, as expressed in a letter to Kusch's father, dated August 15, 1946; reproduced in Walle, 46-49.

^[10] A copy of Abel's report is attached to Kusch's court martial file, BA-ZNS, RM 87-G-K 3140, Untersuchungsakten (investigation records), sheets 1-2, 26-27. Frau Hertha Abel's recollections are contained in a type-written communication to the author, dated Heringsdorf, July 14, 2000. Document in possession of the author.

^[11] Abel's report, *ibid.*

^[12] For several positive evaluations of Abel by his superiors see BA-MA, RM 69/399, K.T.B. der 15. Minensuchflottille, 1. Januar 1942 - 30. September 1942; it includes the war diary and action report of M-1503 for February 18, 1942, when Abel's M-1503 helped destroy a Russian submarine in Norwegian waters.

^[13] According to Abel's widow (*op. cit.*, item 5, 10), M-1503 was ordered in 1942 to detach four men from minesweeping duties to the submarine branch. Abel volunteered to be one of them.

^[14] Walle's statement (*op.cit.*, 95), that U-154 left Lorient as early as January 21, 1944, under its new commander, Lt. Gerth Gemeiner, is obviously incorrect.

^[15] Mrs. Hertha Abel to author, July 14, 2000, type-written reply to questionnaire item 7, 12-16; document in possession of the author.

^[16] See Abel's report, *op. cit.*, 2. The address must have been given in Lorient by the flotilla commander, Fregattenkapitän Ernst Kals, on December 23, 1943, three days after U-154 returned from her 6th patrol (Kusch's second as commanding officer) and before Abel left for his training course for future U-boat commanders in Neustadt on the Baltic.

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[\[17\]](#) Walle, 128–132.

[\[18\]](#) Suhren's version of this incident in Karl Peter, "Der Fall des Oberleutnants zur See Kusch," unpublished MS, dated 1986, copy in U-Boot-Archiv Cuxhaven-Altenbruch, Appendix B.

[\[19\]](#) Information in letter from Kurt Wiemer to Oskarheinz Kusch, dated April 14, 1946; quoted in Walle, 136–137.

[\[20\]](#) See letter by Erwin Rau to Robert Hering, both classmates of Kusch's, dated January 4, 1984, in Peter, 11. Voltaire, Candide (New York: Penguin, 1947), 110–111.

[\[21\]](#) See BA-MA, N 623, vol.6, Sieber papers; undated, type-written note by Dönitz, likely composed while serving his prison sentence in Spandau. Karl Helmut Sieber was a high-ranking official in the naval legal bureaucracy who helped attain the acquittals of Heinrich Hagemann in his two post-war trials on charges of crimes against humanity.

[\[22\]](#) Dönitz letter to Kranzbühler, dated 30 November 1968, quoted in Walle, 138.

[\[23\]](#) See BA-ZNS, RM 87-G-K 3140, sheet 53.