THE LONG AND WINDING ROAD TO WESERÜBUNG

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The German assault on Denmark and Norway, “Unternehmen Weserübung” as it is generally called, aroused the feelings of many members of the former Kriegsmarine right after the end of the war and for more decades to come. Why? In the Nuremberg trials the verdict of Grand Admiral Erich Raeder was based on his complicity in this act of aggression. Of course, Raeder and his followers never accepted the charges against him and the navy. In their eyes, they had been nothing but soldiers, who had done their duty just as the members of Allied forces had done theirs. Accordingly, as long as Raeder was imprisoned in Spandau and also after his release from the Allied prison for war criminals in the mid-1950s due to his steadily worsening health, the verdict of Nuremberg was decried as unjust whenever possible. In the mid-1950s the “question of the Grand Admirals” even caused a fierce debate in parliament. During a public ceremony at Wilhelmshaven in 1956, in which the foundation stone of the new Bundesmarine was laid, a high-ranking naval officer, Captain Zenker, took the opportunity and severely criticised the verdict of Nuremberg as far as Raeder and Dönitz were concerned. Both admirals, he argued, had not only done their duty towards the German people but had led the Kriegsmarine in a clean, respectable and honourable way before and during World War II. Though Zenker was harshly criticised for his political speech by the opposition in the Bundestag, for he had tried to acquit the former leadership of the Kriegsmarine of its complicity in the crimes of the Nazi-regime, the spirit of Zenker’s speech dominated the debate on the role of the Kriegsmarine and its commanders-in-chief during the Second World War for at least another decade, and in some ways probably until Dönitz’s death in December 1980.

Whereas it seems understandable, which does not mean that it was acceptable, that members of the former Kriegsmarine, as well as many others who had been directly or indirectly involved in the planning of this operation, had great difficulties in coping with the Nuremberg trial, it is more difficult to understand and to accept what naval historians wrote
Fig. 6.1. The outline plan for Weserübung.