The Battle of Jutland

The summer of 1916 saw the long-deferred confrontation of Germany's High Seas Fleet and Great Britain's Grand Fleet in the Battle of Jutland—history's biggest naval battle, which both sides claimed as a victory.

Admiral Reinhard Scheer, who became commander in chief of the High Seas Fleet in January 1916, planned to contrive an encounter on the open sea between his fleet and some part of the British fleet in separation from the whole, so that the Germans could exploit their momentary superiority in numbers to achieve victory. Scheer's plan was to ensnare Admiral Beatty's squadron of battle cruisers at Rosyth, midway up Britain's eastern coast, by stratagem and destroy it before any reinforcements from the Grand Fleet's main base at Scapa Flow could reach it.

To set the trap, five battle cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet, together with four light cruisers, were to sail northward, under Hipper's command, from Wilhelmshaven, Ger., to a point off the southwestern coast of Norway. Scheer himself, with the battle squadrons of the High Seas Fleet, was to follow, 50 miles behind, to catch Beatty's forces in the gap once they had been lured eastward across the North Sea in pursuit of Hipper. But the signal for the German operation to begin, made in the afternoon of May 30, was intercepted and partially decoded by the British; and before midnight the whole British Grand Fleet was on its way to a rendezvous off Norway's southwestern coast and roughly across the planned route of the German fleet.

At 2:20 PM on May 31, when Admiral John Jellicoe's Grand Fleet squadrons from Scapa Flow were still 65 miles away to the north, Beatty's advance guard of light cruisers—five miles ahead of his heavier ships—and Hipper's scouting group learned quite accidentally of one another's proximity. An hour later the two lines were drawn up for battle, and in the next 50 minutes the British suffered severely, and the Indefatigable was sunk. When Beatty's battle cruisers came up, however, the

German cruisers, in their turn, sustained such damage that Hipper sent a protective screen of German destroyers in to launch a torpedo attack. The British had lost another battle cruiser, the Queen Mary, before the German High Seas Fleet was sighted by a British patrol to the south, at 4:35 PM. On this report Beatty ordered his ships northward, to lure the Germans toward the Grand Fleet under Jellicoe's command.

Not until 6:14 PM, after Jellicoe's squadrons and Beatty's had been within sight of one another for nearly a quarter of an hour, was the German fleet precisely located—only just in time for Jellicoe to deploy his ships to the best advantage. Jellicoe arrayed the Grand Fleet end-to-end in a line so that their combined broadsides could be brought to bear on the approaching German ships, who could in turn reply only with the forward guns of their leading ships. The British ships in effect formed the horizontal stroke and the German ships the vertical stroke of the letter "T," with the British having deployed into line at a right angle to the German ships' forward progress. This maneuver was in fact known as "crossing the enemy's T" and was the ideal situation dreamed of by the tacticians of both navies, since by "crossing the T" one's forces temporarily gained an overwhelming superiority of firepower.

For the Germans this was a moment of unparalleled risk. Three factors helped prevent the destruction of the German ships in this trap: their own excellent construction, the steadiness and discipline of their crews, and the poor quality of the British shells. The Lützow, the Derfflinger, and the battleship König led the line and were under broadside fire from some 10 British battleships, yet their main guns remained undamaged and they fought back to such effect that one of their salvoes fell full on the Invincible and blew it up. This success, however, did little to relieve the intense bombardment from the other British ships, and the German fleet was still pressing forward into the steel trap of the Grand Fleet.

Relying on the magnificent seamanship of the German crews, Scheer extricated his fleet from the appalling danger into which it had run by a simple but, in practice, extremely difficult maneuver. At 6:30 PM he ordered a turn of 180° for all his ships at once; it was executed without collision; and the German battleships reversed course in unison and steamed out of the jaws of the trap, while German destroyers spread a smoke screen across their rear. The smoke and worsening visibility left Jellicoe in doubt about what had happened, and the British had lost contact with the Germans by 6:45 PM.

Yet the British Grand Fleet had maneuvered in such a way that it ended up between the German High Seas Fleet and the German ports, and this was the situation Scheer most dreaded, so at 6:55 PM Scheer ordered another reverse turn, perhaps hoping to pass around the rear of the British fleet. But the result for him was a worse position than that from which he had just escaped: his battle line had become compressed, and his leading ships found themselves again under intense bombardment from the broadside array of the British ships. Jellicoe had succeeded in crossing the Germans' "T" again. The Lützow now received irreparable damage, and many other German ships were damaged at this point. At 7:15 PM, therefore, to cause a diversion and win time, Scheer ordered his battle cruisers and destroyers ahead to virtually immolate themselves in a massed charge against the British ships.

This was the crisis of the Battle of Jutland. As the German battle cruisers and destroyers steamed forward, the German battleships astern became confused and disorganized in trying to execute their reverse turn. Had Jellicoe ordered the Grand Fleet forward through the screen of charging German battle cruisers at that moment, the fate of the German High Seas Fleet would likely have been sealed. As it was, fearing and overestimating the danger of torpedo attacks from the approaching destroyers, he ordered his fleet to turn away, and the two lines of battleships steamed apart at a speed of more than 20 knots. They did not meet again, and when darkness fell, Jellicoe could not be

sure of the route of the German retreat. By 3:00 AM on June 1 the Germans had safely eluded their pursuers.

The British had sustained greater losses than the Germans in both ships and men. In all, the British lost three battle cruisers, three cruisers, eight destroyers, and 6,274 officers and men in the Battle of Jutland. The Germans lost one battleship, one battle cruiser, four light cruisers, five destroyers, and 2,545 officers and men. The losses inflicted on the British, however, were not enough to affect the numerical superiority of their fleet over the German in the North Sea, where their domination remained practically unchallengeable during the course of the war. Henceforth, the German High Seas Fleet chose not to venture out from the safety of its home ports.

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The Eastern Front, 1916

In the hope of diverting German strength from the attack at Verdun on the Western Front, the Russians gallantly but prematurely opened an offensive north and south of Lake Naroch (Narocz, east of Vilna) on March 18, 1916, and continued it until March 27, though they won very little ground at great cost and only for a short time. They then reverted to preparations for a major offensive in July. The main blow, it was planned, should be delivered by A.E. Evert's central group of armies, assisted by an inward movement of A.N. Kuropatkin's army in the northern sector of the front. But at the same time, A.A. Brusilov's southwestern army group was authorized to make a supposedly diversionary attack in its own sectors. In the event, Brusilov's attack became by far the more important operation of the offensive.

Surprised by the Austrians' Asiago offensive in May, Italy promptly appealed to the Russians for action to draw the enemy's reserves away from the Italian fronts, and the Russians responded by advancing their timetable again. Brusilov undertook to start his attack on June 4, on the

understanding that Evert's should be launched 10 days later.

Thus began an offensive on the Eastern Front that was to be imperial Russia's last really effective military effort. Popularly known as Brusilov's offensive, it had such an astonishing initial success as to revive Allied dreams about the irresistible Russian "steamroller." Instead, its ultimate achievement was to sound the death knell of the Russian monarchy. Brusilov's four armies were distributed along a very wide front, with Lutsk at the northern end, Tarnopol and Buchach (Buczacz) in the central sector, and Czernowitz at the southern end. Having struck first in the Tarnopol and Czernowitz sectors on June 4, Brusilov on June 5 took the Austrians wholly by surprise when he launched A.M. Kaledin's army toward Lutsk: the defenses crumbled at once, and the attackers pushed their way between two Austrian armies. As the offensive was developed, the Russians were equally successful in the Buchach sector and in their thrust into Bukovina, which culminated in the capture of Czernowitz. By June 20, Brusilov's forces had captured 200,000 prisoners.

Evert and Kuropatkin, however, instead of striking in accordance with the agreed plan, found excuses for procrastination. The Russian chief of general staff, M.V. Alekseyev, therefore tried to transfer this inert couple's reserves to Brusilov, but the Russians' lateral communications were so poor that the Germans had time to reinforce the Austrians before Brusilov was strong enough to make the most of his victory. Though his forces in Bukovina advanced as far as the Carpathian Mountains, a counterstroke by Alexander von Linsingen's Germans in the Lutsk sector checked Russian progress at the decisive point. Further Russian drives from the centre of Brusilov's front were launched in July; but by early September the opportunity of exploiting the summer's victory was lost. Brusilov had driven the Austrians from Bukovina and from much of eastern Galicia and had inflicted huge losses of men and equipment on them, but he had depleted Russia's armies by about 1,000,000 men in doing so. (A large portion of this number consisted of deserters or prisoners.) This loss seriously undermined both the morale and the material strength of Russia. Brusilov's offensive

also had indirect results of great consequence. First, it had compelled the Germans to withdraw at least seven divisions from the Western Front, where they could ill be spared from the Verdun and Somme battles. Second, it hastened Romania's unfortunate entry into the war.

Disregarding Romania's military backwardness, the Romanian government of Ionel Brătianu declared war against Austria-Hungary on Aug. 27, 1916. In entering the war, Romania succumbed to the Allies' offers of Austro-Hungarian territory and to the belief that the Central Powers would be too much preoccupied with other fronts to mount any serious riposte against a Romanian offensive. Some 12 of Romania's 23 divisions, in three columns, thus began on August 28 a slow westward advance across Transylvania, where at first there were only five Austro-Hungarian divisions to oppose them.

The riposte of the Central Powers was swifter than the progress of the invasion: Germany, Turkey, and Bulgaria declared war against Romania on August 28, August 30, and September 1, respectively; and Falkenhayn had plans already prepared. Though the miscarriage of his overall program for the year led to his being replaced by Hindenburg as chief of the German general staff on August 29, Falkenhayn's recommendation that Mackensen should direct a Bulgarian attack on southern Romania was approved; and Falkenhayn himself went to command on the Transylvanian front, for which five German as well as two more Austrian divisions were found available as reinforcements.

Mackensen's forces from Bulgaria stormed the Turtucaia (Tutrakan) bridgehead on the Danube southeast of Bucharest on September 5. His subsequent advance eastward into the Dobruja caused the Romanians to switch their reserves to that quarter instead of reinforcing their Transylvanian enterprise, which thereupon came to a halt. Falkenhayn soon attacked: first at the southern end of the 200-mile front, where he threw one of the Romanian columns back into the Roter Turm (Turnu

Roșu) Pass, then in the centre, where by October 9 he had defeated another at Kronstadt (Brașov). For a month, however, the Romanians withstood Falkenhayn's attempts to drive them out of the Vulcan and Szurduk (Surduc) passes into Walachia. But just before winter snows blocked the way, the Germans took the two passes and advanced southward to Tîrgu Jiu, where they won another victory. Then Mackensen, having turned westward from the Dobruja, crossed the Danube near Bucharest, on which his and Falkenhayn's armies converged. Bucharest fell on December 6, and the Romanian Army, a crippled force, could only fall back northeastward into Moldavia, where it had the belated support of Russian troops. The Central Powers had access to Romania's wheat fields and oil wells, and the Russians had 300 more miles of front to defend.

German strategy and the submarine war, 1916–January 1917

Both Admiral Scheer and General Falkenhayn doubted whether the German submarines could do any decisive damage to Great Britain so long as their warfare was restricted in deference to the protests of the United States; and, after a tentative reopening of the submarine campaign on Feb. 4, 1916, the German naval authorities in March gave the U-boats permission to sink without warning all ships except passenger vessels. The German civilian statesmen, however, who paid due attention to their diplomats' warnings about U.S. opinion, were soon able to prevail over the generals and the admirals: on May 4 the scope of the submarine campaign was again severely restricted.

The controversy between the statesmen and the advocates of unrestricted warfare was not dead yet. Hindenburg, chief of the general staff from August 29, had Ludendorff as his quartermaster general, and Ludendorff was quickly won over to supporting the chief of the Admiralty staff, Henning von Holtzendorff, in his arguments against the German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, and the foreign minister, Gottlieb von Jagow. Whereas Bethmann and some other statesmen were hoping for a negotiated peace (see below), Hindenburg and Ludendorff were committed to a military victory. The British naval blockade, however, threatened to starve Germany into collapse before a military victory could be achieved, and soon Hindenburg and Ludendorff got

their way: it was decided that, from Feb. 1, 1917, submarine warfare should be unrestricted and overtly so.