

The war at sea, 1914–15

In August 1914 Great Britain, with 29 capital ships ready and 13 under construction, and Germany, with 18 and nine, were the two great rival sea powers. Neither of them at first wanted a direct confrontation: the British were chiefly concerned with the protection of their trade routes; the Germans hoped that mines and submarine attacks would gradually destroy Great Britain's numerical superiority, so that confrontation could eventually take place on equal terms.

The first significant encounter between the two navies was that of the Helgoland Bight, on August 28, 1914, when a British force under Admiral Sir David Beatty, having entered German home waters, sank or damaged several German light cruisers and killed or captured 1,000 men at a cost of one British ship damaged and 35 deaths. For the following months the Germans in European or British waters confined themselves to submarine warfare—not without some notable successes: on September 22 a single German submarine, or U-boat, sank three British cruisers within an hour; on October 7 a U-boat made its way into the anchorage of Loch Ewe, on the west coast of Scotland; on October 15 the British cruiser Hawke was torpedoed; and on October 27 the British battleship Audacious was sunk by a mine.

On December 15 battle cruisers of the German High Seas Fleet set off on a sortie across the North Sea, under the command of Admiral Franz von Hipper: they bombarded several British towns and then made their way home safely. Hipper's next sortie, however, was intercepted on its way out: on January 24, 1915, in the Battle of the Dogger Bank, the German cruiser Blücher was sunk and two other cruisers damaged before the Germans could make their escape.

Abroad on the high seas, the Germans' most powerful surface force was the East Asiatic squadron of fast cruisers, including the Scharnhorst, the Gneisenau, and the Nürnberg, under Admiral Graf Maximilian von Spee. For four months this fleet ranged almost unhindered over the Pacific Ocean, while the Emden, having joined the squadron in August 1914, was detached for service in the Indian

Ocean. The Germans could thus threaten not only merchant shipping on the British trade routes but also troopships on their way to Europe or the Middle East from India, New Zealand, or Australia. The Emden sank merchant ships in the Bay of Bengal, bombarded Madras (September 22; now Chennai, India), haunted the approaches to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), and had destroyed 15 Allied ships in all before it was caught and sunk off the Cocos Islands on November 9 by the Australian cruiser Sydney.

Meanwhile, Admiral von Spee's main squadron since August had been threading a devious course in the Pacific from the Caroline Islands toward the Chilean coast and had been joined by two more cruisers, the Leipzig and the Dresden. On November 1, in the Battle of Coronel, it inflicted a sensational defeat on a British force, under Sir Christopher Cradock, which had sailed from the Atlantic to hunt it down: without losing a single ship, it sank Cradock's two major cruisers, Cradock himself being killed. But the fortunes of the war on the high seas were reversed when, on December 8, the German squadron attacked the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands in the South Atlantic, probably unaware of the naval strength that the British, since Coronel, had been concentrating there under Admiral Sir Doveton Sturdee: two battle cruisers (the Invincible and Inflexible, each equipped with eight 12-inch guns) and six other cruisers. The German ships were suffering from wear and tear after their long cruise in the Pacific and were no match for the newer, faster British ships, which soon overtook them. The Scharnhorst, with Admiral von Spee aboard, was the first ship to be sunk, then the Gneisenau, followed by the Nürnberg and the Leipzig. The British ships, which had fought at long range so as to render useless the smaller guns of the Germans, sustained only 25 casualties in this engagement. When the German light cruiser Dresden was caught and sunk off the Juan Fernández Islands on March 14, 1915, commerce raiding by German surface ships on the high seas was at an end. It was just beginning by German submarines, however.

The belligerent navies were employed as much in interfering with commerce as in fighting each

other. Immediately after the outbreak of war, the British had instituted an economic blockade of Germany, with the aim of preventing all supplies reaching that country from the outside world. The two routes by which supplies could reach German ports were: (1) through the English Channel and the Strait of Dover and (2) around the north of Scotland. A minefield laid in the Strait of Dover with a narrow free lane made it fairly easy to intercept and search ships using the Channel. To the north of Scotland, however, there was an area of more than 200,000 square miles (520,000 square kilometres) to be patrolled, and the task was assigned to a squadron of armed merchant cruisers. During the early months of the war, only absolute contraband such as guns and ammunition was restricted, but the list was gradually extended to include almost all material that might be of use to the enemy.

The prevention of the free passage of trading ships led to considerable difficulties among the neutral nations, particularly with the United States, whose trading interests were hampered by British policy. Nevertheless, the British blockade was extremely effective, and during 1915 the British patrols stopped and inspected more than 3,000 vessels, of which 743 were sent into port for examination. Outward-bound trade from Germany was brought to a complete standstill.

The Germans similarly sought to attack Great Britain's economy with a campaign against its supply lines of merchant shipping. In 1915, however, with their surface commerce raiders eliminated from the conflict, they were forced to rely entirely on the submarine.

The Germans began their submarine campaign against commerce by sinking a British merchant steamship (Glitra), after evacuating the crew, on October 20, 1914. A number of other sinkings followed, and the Germans soon became convinced that the submarine would be able to bring the British to an early peace where the commerce raiders on the high seas had failed. On January 30, 1915, Germany carried the campaign a stage further by torpedoing three British steamers

(Tokomaru, Ikaria, and Oriole) without warning. They next announced, on February 4, that from February 18 they would treat the waters around the British Isles as a war zone in which all Allied merchant ships were to be destroyed, and in which no ship, whether enemy or not, would be immune.

Yet, whereas the Allied blockade was preventing almost all trade for Germany from reaching that nation's ports, the German submarine campaign yielded less satisfactory results. During the first week of the campaign seven Allied or Allied-bound ships were sunk out of 11 attacked, but 1,370 others sailed without being harassed by the German submarines. In the whole of March 1915, during which 6,000 sailings were recorded, only 21 ships were sunk, and in April only 23 ships from a similar number. Apart from its lack of positive success, the U-boat arm was continuously harried by Great Britain's extensive antisubmarine measures, which included nets, specially armed merchant ships, hydrophones for locating the noise of a submarine's engines, and depth bombs for destroying it underwater.

For the Germans, a worse result than any of the British countermeasures imposed on them was the long-term growth of hostility on the part of the neutral countries. Certainly the neutrals were far from happy with the British blockade, but the German declaration of the war zone and subsequent events turned them progressively away from their attitude of sympathy for Germany. The hardening of their outlook began in February 1915, when the Norwegian steamship *Belridge*, carrying oil from New Orleans to Amsterdam, was torpedoed and sunk in the English Channel. The Germans continued to sink neutral ships occasionally, and undecided countries soon began to adopt a hostile outlook toward this activity when the safety of their own shipping was threatened.

Much more serious was an action that confirmed the inability of the German command to perceive that a minor tactical success could constitute a strategic blunder of the most extreme magnitude.

This was the sinking by a German submarine on May 7, 1915, of the British liner Lusitania, which was on its way from New York to Liverpool: though the ship was in fact carrying 173 tons of ammunition, it had nearly 2,000 civilian passengers, and the 1,198 people who were drowned included 128 U.S. citizens. The loss of the liner and so many of its passengers, including the Americans, aroused a wave of indignation in the United States, and it was fully expected that a declaration of war might follow. But the U.S. government clung to its policy of neutrality and contented itself with sending several notes of protest to Germany. Despite this, the Germans persisted in their intention and, on August 17, sank the Arabic, which also had U.S. and other neutral passengers. Following a new U.S. protest, the Germans undertook to ensure the safety of passengers before sinking liners henceforth; but only after the torpedoing of yet another liner, the Hesperia, did Germany, on September 18, decide to suspend its submarine campaign in the English Channel and west of the British Isles, for fear of provoking the United States further. The German civilian statesmen had temporarily prevailed over the naval high command, which advocated "unrestricted" submarine warfare.