

# *Two blockades and a battle: the significance of the Battle of Jutland*

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*The Battle of Jutland cemented the Royal Navy's blockade of Germany and command of the North Sea. Although a tactical victory for the Germans, Jutland demonstrated the inability of the German High Seas Fleet to break the Royal Navy's dominance in the North Sea and hence the British blockade. It was, thus, a strategic victory for the British. Unrestricted submarine warfare was Germany's attempt to wage a similar blockade against Britain. Initially successful, the strategy ultimately failed, and it was a contributing factor to America's decision to enter into the war. The combination of the United States joining the Entente and the Entente blockade, became part of the chain of events that contributed to Germany's eventual defeat.*

The Battle of Jutland was a significant naval battle of World War I – it cemented the British Royal Navy's blockade of Germany and contributed to the resumption of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare against ships trading with Britain, a key factor in bringing the United States of America into the war. The battle was fought from 31 May to 1 June 1916, pitting the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet of Admiral John Jellicoe against Germany's High Seas Fleet led by Vice-Admiral Reinhard Scheer (Black 2017, 113).

From the outbreak of the war, Britain possessed considerable numerical superiority at sea over Germany. At Jutland, the British numbered 151 surface ships to Germany's 101 (Zabecki 2014, 677). In light of this equation, German naval strategy was to ambush and destroy a section of the British Grand fleet to even the disparity between the two nations (Campbell 1986, 2). It was the employment of this strategy in late May 1916 that catalysed the Battle of Jutland. Understanding the significance of Jutland requires contextualising it against both the nature of World War I as a war of attrition and the blockade of Germany and the significance of America's intervention as a combatant into the war.

## **Britain's Naval Blockade of Germany**

Attrition warfare, or "wearing down the enemy", is defined by the slow, gradual destruction of the enemy's military capacity and ability to conduct war. The victor would be the belligerent that could outlast its opponent by tolerating more significant losses. Naturally, the side with greater manpower and greater capacity to fight would be more likely to succeed, should relatively equal losses be suffered (Mearsheimer 1983, 34). However, it was not simply a case of having a bigger population; manpower had to be deployed, requiring equipment, money, political capital and the support of the populace for the war. For a nation, a large population alone does not guarantee success can be brought to bear on the battlefield.

The devolution of the Western Front into the

stalemate of trench warfare led to attrition warfare. German, French and British commanders determined that victory would require exhausting the enemy such that a weakness appeared in their defensive lines that could be exploited. All sides looked to economic warfare to accelerate this process, and Britain's blockade had a severe impact on Germany's political will to continue fighting as the war progressed (Mckercher 1998, 125). The blockade restricted Germany to importing from and exporting to neutrals in Europe, whilst it severed Germany's access to international credit markets (Strachan 2006). Germany relied on food imports, and a report that the German government had requisitioned food led to foodstuff imports being considered war *matériel* and thus contraband, making foodstuffs subject to the blockade (Osborne 2004, 64). The subsequent economic suffering contributed to German discontent with their government after 1915 (Mckercher 1998, 125).

For Germany to break the blockade, she needed to achieve a decisive victory over the Royal Navy to negate Britain's superiority at sea (Friedman 2015, 17). When Winston Churchill described British commander Admiral John Jellicoe as "the only man on either side who could lose the war in an afternoon," he was referencing the disastrous effects that the loss of naval superiority would incur (Churchill 1927, 106).

## **The Battle**

The battle, fought from 31 May to 1 June 1916, lacked significance in an immediate sense. The British lost three battle cruisers, three cruisers and eight destroyers; the Germans lost one battle cruiser, one pre-dreadnought, four cruisers and five destroyers. The British suffered 6,094 casualties, the Germans 3,058 (Tucker 2005, 622). Though the Germans suffered fewer losses, their fleet limped home, whilst the British held the battlefield, ready for action the following day. The German fleet was not ready to put to sea again until August (Grove 2017).

After Jutland, the blockade of Germany was

enforced more tightly and more rigorously (Ferris 2016, 105). Whilst the High Seas Fleet was not confined to port post-Jutland, it did not threaten Britain's naval superiority (Grove 2017). Though Admiral Scheer sortied into the North Sea again in an attempt to lure the Grand Fleet out, nothing was achieved (Kennedy 2014, 336). The British realised that they did not need to risk their superiority by responding to these sorties, whilst the Germans realised they could not defeat the blockade with surface forces. Given these positions, British numerical superiority at sea continued to grow (Engvig 2017, 19-21). Jutland was a tactical victory for Germany, but a strategic victory for Britain.

### **Significance of the Battle**

The real significance of Jutland was that it confirmed British supremacy at sea and, by extension, their blockade. This had two major effects. First, the blockade remained as a corollary of continued naval dominance and would eventually be one factor in Germany's collapse and the signing of the armistice. Second, Jutland's aftermath contributed to Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare. This, along with the Zimmerman telegram<sup>1</sup>, brought America into the war, dramatically rebalancing the attrition warfare equation in the Entente's favour, though the effect of their troops was not felt until 1918.

Assessing the relative significance of the Battle of Jutland's contribution to Germany's defeat requires an analysis of the integral role that the blockade played. Bell (1961), in his official account, argued that the blockade contributed to unrest in Germany, ultimately caused revolution and, by extension, Germany's defeat. In her extensive re-analysis, Siney (1973, v) concluded that the blockade was a "decisive factor" in Germany's defeat, whilst Hough (1983, 321) asserted that the Royal Navy and their blockade "provided the greatest contribution to victory".

Ferguson (2012, 252) questioned these views, arguing that the effect of the blockade was not as great as asserted. This perspective, however, remains in the minority and Osborne's (2004) study in concluding that the blockade provided the greatest contribution to the war effort, bestows a convincing framework for understanding the significance of the contribution.

### **Economic hardship in Germany**

Economic hardship caused by the blockade coalesced into severe political discontent, and, by 1917, Germany was unable to meet the economic needs of the war and country. The government's failure to provide civilians' basic needs sowed significant political discord and contributed to the revolution. The blockade destroyed the domestic front and lack of food not only

contributed greatly to the collapse of political will on the home front but also reduced workers' efficiency and thus output. Germany simply lacked the raw materials required to maintain the necessary industrial output to prosecute the war (Osborne 2004, 182-183).

By 1917, the calorie levels of German soldiers' rations were insufficient to maintain the energy levels required for battle (Van der Kloot 2014). Finally, due to the blockade, the shortage of crucial war *matériel* was a key reason for the failure of the 1918 German Spring Offensive (Osborne 2004, 183). Lack of supplies was responsible for halting many German advances and for the eventual decline of the offensive (Zabecki 2005, 345). The relentless blockade of Germany contributed to the political, industrial and military failings.

### **Unrestricted submarine warfare against Britain**

The Battle of Jutland played a role in Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare and, by extension, the introduction of the United States into the war (Rahn 2015, 191; Kennedy 2014, 335). However, naval analyst Eric Grove argues that this is false (Grove 2017, 173). Grove presents Scheer's sorties into the North Sea in August and October – further attempts to ambush and destroy a section of the Grand Fleet – as evidence against the causal link between Jutland and the resumption of submarine warfare. The August sortie, however, was in part motivated by an attempt to improve the High Seas Fleet's morale as the order read "to parade before the eyes of England and the world the unbroken might of the German fleet" (Marder 2014, 286). Additionally, the Royal Navy was firmly in control of the North Sea at that point (Kennedy 2014, 334). The failure to oppose Britain's naval dominance required alternative strategies, and Admiral Scheer's battle report from Jutland to the Kaiser strongly urged the adoption of unrestricted submarine warfare (Scheer 1920, 246). At a strategic level, Germany's resorting to submarines is logical by the dictums of what is now called 'asymmetric warfare', where a militarily weaker force seeks to achieve an advantage over a more powerful one. Germany had a comparative advantage in underwater warfare whilst Britain held naval superiority on the surface. The debate over the resumption of submarine warfare continued between the navy and government for the remainder of 1916 (Scheer 1920, 246). Submarines were the only way Germany could realistically engage and challenge Britain at sea.

On 13 October 1916, Admiral Scheer presented a petition to the Emperor, urging that unrestricted submarine warfare be resumed (Scheer 1920, 246). The Kaiser, Chancellor and military leaders met on 9 January 1917 at the Pless Conference and agreed to immediately resume unrestricted submarine warfare, which recommenced on 1 February 1917 (Carnegie 1923, 1320-1321). At first, the losses were severe, British tonnage losses peaked at 860,334 in April (Tarrant 1989, 152-153). Secretary of the Imperial War

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<sup>1</sup>The Zimmerman telegram was a secret cable from the German foreign office in January 1917, proposing a military alliance with Mexico in the event that America entered the war against Germany. It was intercepted by the British and published, causing intense resentment against Germany in America.

Cabinet Maurice Hankey wrote in a memorandum: “switch shipping from moving ammunition to bringing wheat from the United States and Canada” (Hankey 1917). Such was the food crisis that rationing was extended to British soldiers (Breemer 2010, 57). Rear Admiral William Sowden Sims, after a meeting with Admiral John Jellicoe regarding the scale of the crisis, cabled to Washington, “briefly stated; I consider that at the present moment we are losing the war” (Sims and Hendrick 1920, 43). With the British introduction of the convoy system, however, and with United States Navy vessels escorting convoys as well, the British managed to reduce their shipping losses. British losses averaged 400,000 tons until spring 1918 when the U-boat threat receded, and losses fell below 300,000 tons (Sims and Hendrick 1920, 58-62). At a grand strategic level, the Zimmerman Telegram and the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, followed by the sinking of five United States merchant ships including the liner *Housatonic*, triggered the American decision to join the war alongside the Entente (Schmidt 2005, 83).

### **America becomes a combatant**

America's introduction into the war tipped the scales of attrition warfare in favour of the Entente. The blockade on Germany tightened as restrictions on neutrals could be enforced more rigorously. Beckett (2007, 547) argues that the blockade did not become an effective strategy with which to defeat Germany until America joined the war. By 1918, ships from neutral countries were being intercepted (Mick 2014, 155), and a virtual embargo was imposed on the Netherlands (Kramer 2014, 470). Dutch exports to Germany fell from £25,280,000 in 1917 to £12,640,000 in 1918, and German food imports fell further as well, from 5181 tons of fats in 1917 to 1928 tons in 1918 (Osborn 2004, 180). The introduction of American manpower was a decisive blow to Germany, who attempted to pre-empt it with the failed Spring Offensive (Murray 2005, 304). The German army strength fell from 5.1 million to 4.2 million, and the forces of the Entente grew. By the war's end, there were some 2 million American soldiers in Europe and 4 million under arms. Germany's weakened home front, in combination with growing inferiority to the Entente's manpower, dictated that, even before the breakthrough of the Hundred Day's Offensive, Germany was facing challenges.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the naval Battle of Jutland was significant for two reasons. Firstly, Germany's failure to break the British blockade strangled their war effort logistically. Secondly, the battle contributed to Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare which, in combination with the Zimmerman Telegram and the sinking of United States merchant ships, brought America into the war and significantly advantaged the Entente Powers. The failure of Germany's 1918 Spring Offensive to defeat the Entente

before America's weight could be brought to bear signalled Germany's eventual defeat. The significance of the Battle of Jutland is its contribution to the chain of events that shaped the outcome of the Great War.

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