

Germany's High Sea Fleet in the World War

The Preface and Conclusion of
Admiral Reinhard Scheer's
account of the High Sea Fleet in WWI

Scheer was Commander-in-Chief of the High Sea
Fleet from 18 January 1916.

Background.

Upon promotion to the position of Commander in Chief of The High Sea Fleet, Scheer wrote *Guiding Principles for Sea Warfare in the North Sea*, which outlined his strategic plans. His central idea was that the Grand Fleet should be pressured by higher U-boat activity and zeppelin raids as well as increased fleet sorties.

The Grand Fleet would be forced to abandon the distant blockade and would have to attack the German fleet; the Kaiser approved the memorandum on 23 February 1916, which allowed Scheer to use the fleet more aggressively.

Following the Kaiser's order forbidding unrestricted submarine warfare on 24 April 1916, Scheer ordered all of the U-boats in the Atlantic to return to Germany and abandon commerce raiding.

Scheer intended to use the submarines to support the fleet by stationing the U-boats off major British naval bases. The U-boats would intercept British forces leaving the ports when provoked by a bombardment of English towns by the scouting battlecruisers of Vice Admiral Franz von Hipper.

This plan ultimately led to the Battle of Jutland in May 1917.

After the damage inflicted at Jutland, the High Seas Fleet never again left its home base in full force until the eventual Surrender on November 21st 1918.

PREFACE

The victor has the privilege of writing the story of the war; for one mistrusts the vanquished, because he will try to palliate and excuse his defeats. But we are victors and vanquished at one and the same time, and in depicting our success the difficult problem confronts us of not forgetting that our strength did not last out to the end.

Exceptionally tragic is the fate of our Fleet. It embodied the sense of power resulting from the unification of the Empire, a sense which was conscious of its responsibility to provide for the suitable security of our immensely flourishing political and economical expansion. By creating a fleet we strengthened our claim to sea power, without which the Empire must wither away, we remained a thorn in the side of the British, and their ill-will was the constant accompaniment of our growth. The freedom of the seas, which we strove for in line with our evolution, England was never willing to grant, even if it had to come to a world-war on the point.

In the four years' struggle which Germany waged against the desire of its enemies to destroy it, the Fleet was able, beyond all foreign expectations, to hold its own, and what is more, it was our conduct of the naval war that succeeded in forcing the stubborn enemy to the brink of destruction. But, nevertheless, we have lost the war, and with the surrender of the German Fleet the expectations of an independent shaping of our destiny have vanished for long enough.

To the history of the naval war, as it presented itself to me and was for some years carried on under my guidance, this book will add a contribution. I should like, however, along with the description of my war experiences, to give the assurance to the German people that the German Fleet, which ventured to boast of being a favourite creation of the nation, strove to do its duty, and entered into the war inspired only by the thought of justifying the confidence reposed in it and of standing on an equal footing with the warriors on land. The remembrance of the famous deeds which were accomplished on the sea will henceforth preserve over the grave of the German Fleet the hope that our race will succeed in creating for itself a position among the nations worthy of the German people.

SCHEER.

Weimar, September, 1919.

CONCLUSION

“I have no longer a Navy.”

With these words the Emperor repudiated my objections when on the afternoon of November 9 I urged that if he resigned the Navy would be without a leader. Deep disappointment sounded in these words, the last that I heard from His Majesty.

In the evening of the same day the Armistice conditions were published, among which was the demand for the surrender of the German Fleet and of all the U-boats. No opposition could be expected from the Revolutionary Government. It consented to everything in order to get rid of the hated “Militarism,” and delivered the defenceless German people into the hands of its enemies.

A curse lies on the Navy because out of its ranks Revolution first sprang and spread over the land; and many who regarded its deeds with pride are to this day at a loss to know how such a change can have been possible.

The conditions of life on the large ships, the close quarters in which the men lived, favoured the propagation of this agitation, which was spread by any and every means. Further, the crews were most easily exposed to temptation because of their close connection with the Homeland. But the most important and the decisive cause was this: the war-weariness of the whole nation, increased by hunger and all sorts of privations, had become so widespread that even the fighting forces had lost faith in a happy end to the war.

On the day when the German National Assembly accepted that fatal peace which perpetuates hatred the deed accomplished at Scapa Flow once more gave evidence of the Spirit which inspired the Navy, as it did the Army, in the days when they rejoiced in battle. However much we are bowed down, we can still do justice to all the great things that were achieved. That is the only comfort that we can take in regarding the dark future that awaits us; it is the foundation stone upon which to build up new hopes. The strength which the German people developed enabled us to withstand the onslaught of overwhelmingly superior forces for four and a half years, to keep the enemy out of our own country, to fell the giant Russia, and even to bring England, who thought herself unassailable, to the brink of destruction this strength of ours was so mighty that our downfall could only be accomplished by extraordinary means: we had to inflict defeat upon ourselves.

The credit of inventing this expedient belongs to England, and the surrender of our Fleet appears as the great triumph which her sea power has won. History will not find much that is worthy of praise in the way England waged the war at

sea; it may laud her ultimate success, but not the means by which it was achieved. The very surrender of our ships is the best proof that we were not defeated until in the Homeland the will to continue the struggle had been so sapped by hunger and privation that the people were susceptible to the poisonous ideas spread by enemy propaganda, of which an unscrupulous Revolutionary party made use to attain its selfish ends. It was England's privilege to extend the war to the economic sphere in an unheard-of manner. The fight for sea commerce was to lead to the strangling of the whole German people. For that purpose violence had to be done to the rights of the neutrals, whose power, compared with that of the ring of our enemies, was of no avail. England's policy of alliance placed her in a position to carry out her plan of starvation, without any fear of a protest from civilised society. She cleverly diverted attention from the enormity of her proceedings by simultaneously opening a campaign of lies about Germany's atrocities and Hun-like behaviour. Widespread financial operations, moreover, united American with English interests.

It was the task of our Fleet to defeat the English blockade, or to neutralise the effects of it by the damage it inflicted on the enemy. The latter method was chosen. The U-boat proved to be a suitable means to this end. We must be grateful that the technical development of the U-boat had reached such perfection, just in the nick of time, that these craft could be sent out to such distances and for such length of time as the war against commerce demanded. Fault-finding is an objectionable quality of the German. Many a time he has scorned and belittled the great work of twenty years of building a Navy which should be able to meet the English Fleet in battle. The accusations made are false and prove nothing but the ignorance or the ill-will of those who make them. No doubt our ships had faults—no naval authorities can make a claim to infallibility—but they were of absolutely no account compared with the fact that the material, as well as the spirit and training of the crews, were so good that our Fleet was able to hold its own against the English.

Only a ship-building industry like that of Germany, which, as the German Fleet developed, produced such super-excellent ships, could have helped to supplement our Fleet during the war by the construction of a new U-boat fleet. The reliability of the material, and the manner in which the boats were built, increased the courage of the crews who, with full trust in their weapon, could dare all.

In view of England's plan of campaign, there was no alternative but to inflict direct injury upon English commerce. We could not build a sufficiently great

number of additional large ships to compensate for the inevitable losses which we were bound to suffer in the long run in a conflict with the numerically superior English Fleet. In carrying out their blockade, that Fleet had the advantage of choosing its field of action in the Northern waters, far removed from our bases. After their experiences in action, the English left the southern part of the North Sea for us to deploy in, and contented themselves with warding off the U-boat danger. Throughout they were forced to be on the defensive. We ought to have tried earlier what the result of a victory by our Fleet would be. It was a mistake on the part of the naval leaders not to do so. It was only after we had been proved in battle that we gained sufficient confidence to send the U-boats permanently into the North Sea to wage war on commerce against England, and in the teeth of the resistance of her Fleet.

The earlier the U-boat campaign was started in full earnest, the greater was the prospect of being able to go through with it; it was wrong to wait until the endurance of our people had been tried to the utmost by the effects of the blockade. The number of boats at the beginning of 1916 would have been amply sufficient for the purpose. The success of a U-boat campaign does not depend solely on the number of the boats, but rather upon their quality and the skill of their navigators. U-boats of great speed and unlimited powers of remaining at sea, which could not be caught, would soon paralyse the sea traffic of an Island State like England. As such an ideal was not capable of full attainment, the greater number of boats had to make up for the lack of perfection. The results achieved fulfilled, and even surpassed, expectation, even though a criminally long time was allowed the enemy to organise his defence. That we did not reach the limit of England's endurance in time was due, not to the ill-success of the U-boats, but to the encouragement which the enemy found in his hour of need in our political attitude and that of our Allies.

Why should he lower his colours when in July, 1917, we cried to him: "We want peace," - which in his ears sounded like "We need peace" - and when we let Austria and our enemies know that the country could not continue the war longer than the autumn of that year? The worse the enemy fared, the more boldly he bore himself. We, unfortunately, adopted the opposite attitude.

From the very first a large proportion of the people had been nervous as to the disadvantageous effects of the U-boat campaign. This had become a party question, owing to its treatment in Parliament and the Press. The leading statesman's dislike of it was openly acknowledged everywhere; he left the decision to the Supreme Army Command, who were to fix the date in

accordance with the general military situation, and he put the responsibility on their shoulders.

True, the nation had absolute confidence in the Supreme Army Command, because the generals in command had earned this confidence. In this question of life and death, too, they formed an opinion in common with the Naval Staff, and decided upon action when no other means of breaking the enemy's resistance was to be found. But to succeed we had need of the confidence and co-operation of the whole nation, so that they might hold out until success was ensured. The Reichstag resolution of July, 1917, must have been viewed by the enemy as a proof that this confidence did not exist.

From then onwards there was no question of the enemy's yielding. Now, a year after the conflict has ceased, we get indications from England every day of how hopeless the situation seemed there. But realising their weakness, they were able to weather the critical period in the autumn of 1917 by seizing enemy shipping for their own ends, and they strove zealously to intensify the disintegrating forces which were at work amongst us. This war has taught us to what an extent a nation can limit its economic needs. For more than a year after the conclusion of the Armistice we bore the burden of the blockade although huge quantities of supplies had to be left in enemy hands, or were idly squandered, when our troops retreated.

Our situation would not have been worse had the war continued, while the enemy would have kept on losing an amount of tonnage that could not be replaced.

But his will to endure was stronger than ours, for he recognised the weakness of our Government, whose leaders, unlike those of the enemy Cabinets, did not have the whole-hearted support of representatives of the majority of the people.

The World War was to be a test for the German nation, whether it could hold its own as a factor of civilisation overseas. The British tried with might and main to oust it from its position, when the might of the German Empire was behind it. They felt the danger that lay in our superior diligence, the excellence of German work, and the sterling qualities of German education and culture as compared with the shallow civilisation of the Anglo-Saxons meant for nothing but effect. Our peaceful penetration was met with violence. How great they thought the danger is shown by the mighty efforts of our enemies to crush us.

They have attained their object, because our leading statesmen at the outbreak of war did not recognise the magnitude of our task, or - which is worse - looked upon it as beyond our strength. If the great aim had been rightly realised then, if

it had been pursued with all the forces and strength at our disposal, and if the nation's will to victory had been continually directed towards it, we might have been sure of success.

The enormity and baseness of the methods with which our downfall had been planned, inflamed the sense of antagonism in our people to a degree which it could not otherwise have attained. The nation, however, could not fail to grow weary of its efforts when the only aim that was left to it after long years of fighting and starvation was that of self-preservation; it was deluded by enemy craft and wiles into thinking that this could be secured by other means.

Thus dissension arose at home, and our strength was exhausted in internecine strife for a phantom of national freedom; and the only palpable result of all this, brought about by the Revolution, is the helplessness of that freedom, deprived as it is of the power to defend itself from foreign aggression .

Toil and labour must start afresh to raise the honour of the German Navy. In this task the Fatherland will feel the lack of many capable men, who cannot live in the straitened circumstances that have been forced upon us, and who will migrate elsewhere. But our hopes are centred on these, that they will not deny their love of home, but will preserve their loyalty to their enslaved Fatherland and will cherish it in their descendants until the vitality of Germany, oppressed and overwhelmed as it now is, has won through to a new development.

The Englishman may now think himself entitled to look down upon us with scorn and contempt, yet in his feelings of superiority there will always be the sting that he was not victorious in battle, and that his method of waging war is one that must recoil upon his own head.

Other World Powers will appear upon the scene who will only concede a prerogative at sea to him who, as in Nelson's days, can assert his pre-eminence in open conflict.
