

Beginnings of War

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

The Russians opened their offensive with a probing attack on August 17. They were driven back by the Germans. When their main body arrived in strength three days later, the Germans were advancing to attack them under cover of darkness. The Russians had prepared overnight trenches and fortified farm buildings and houses. The harder the Germans pressed forward, the higher their casualties. The Russian artillery was well positioned and added to the carnage, firing at close range. Appalled by the German army's predicament, the high command lost confidence in General Prittwitz and replaced him with General Ludendorff.

On the morning of August 28, the Russian leading infantry reached Willenburg, just inside East Prussia from the Russian territory, and met German troops. They belonged to veterans of the fighting south of the Masurian Lakes, who had been attacking southward since the previous day. The result was a cauldron battle, which surrounded the Russians and became known as the battle of Tannenberg. The Germans counted 92,000 Russian prisoners and 50,000 enemy killed and wounded. Tannenberg had a military importance far more significant than its symbolic one. It reversed the timetable of Germany's war plan. Before the triumph, victory was expected in the west, while the front in the east was to be held as best as it could. After Tannenberg, disaster in the east no longer threatened. Tannenberg temporarily devastated the Russians.

The war in the East was a war on a titanic scale, as large in numbers committed as in the west and larger by far in terms of space and depth of movement. By early October 1914, there were four fronts in the east. From north to south, there was a German-Russian front on the eastern border of East Prussia. There was an Austro-German-Russian front on the Vistula. There was a Russian-Austrian front on the San and a Russian-Austrian front in the eastern Carpathians. The whole extent, from the Baltic to the Romanian border, was nearly 500 miles. The German Ninth Army was marching down the west bank of the Vistula, believing that the Russians were not in strength near Warsaw and could be encircled from the north. The Russians were preparing to cross the Vistula from the east below Ivangorod, to which the Austrians had advanced. They planned to march up above Warsaw and to launch their own outflanking movement against the Germans. Due to their lack of mobility, the Germans could not pull off the maneuver, while the Russians had superiority of numbers. On October 18, the Germans decided to withdraw. The battle of Warsaw was a Russian victory. Though it had not resulted in the encirclement they envisioned, it demonstrated the Russians' superiority in the warfare of maneuver and in the strategy of deception. On November 2, the Russians resumed their planned offensive.

The year 1915 was a formative experience, one in which the lines of development which would be followed through into the battles of 1918 were put in place. Although the front in 1915 was static, the thinking of the armies was not. The western front was an intensely competitive environment, where the innovation of one side was emulated, improved upon or negated by the other. It was this very cycle of action and reaction, designed to break the deadlock, which confirmed it. The armies of both sides were equipped, organized and fought in very different ways from those of 1914.

Fought from March 10 to 13, 1915, the Battle of Neuve Chapelle was originally intended to comprise part of a wider Allied offensive in the Artois region. The Second Battle of Ypres comprised the only major attack launched by the German forces on the Western Front in 1915, Eric von Falkenhayn preferring to concentrate German efforts against the Russians on the Eastern Front. Second Battle of Ypres, April 22, 1915, is generally remembered today as marking the first use of gas on the Western Front. On September 25, At Loos, gas was discharged and hung about in no man's land or even drifted back into the British trenches, hindering their advance. After being ordered to resume their advance the next morning, the British moved forward in ten columns, each of about a thousand men. The Germans fired into the mass movement with machine guns. The effect was devastating. The enemy was seen falling by the hundreds. This battle exemplifies the battles of 1915.

In the trenches, men lived a life of primitive instincts: fear, hunger, thirst and with the physical extremes, deafening noises, sudden flashes, extreme cold and agonizing pain. Intellect and reason had almost no place. The most innocent of natural occurrences could be the cause of intense hardship.

Though the soldiers hardly ever saw their adversary, they were continually aware of his presence, even in the quietest of sectors. Any unit in the trenches would always sustain casualties. In six months of a large-scale offensive, planners reckoned on losing over 500,000 men and in six months of trench warfare, 300,000 men. The most common cause of battle casualties when in the trenches was enemy artillery fire. On almost every day at least some shells would fall on the trenches, killing, maiming or burying a few unfortunate soldiers.

On the outbreak of war, the British and French at once took action to reduce the garrisons of Germany's colonies. The Japanese occupied the Marianas, Marshalls and Carolines in the Pacific. In Africa; the tiny territory of Togo was quickly overrun by troops of the West African Rifles. Kamerun proved more difficult to conquer. The Allied force included troops of the Nigeria, Gold Coast and Sierra Leone Regiments under British command, French African infantry and a Belgian contingent brought up from the Congo. The German government had hoped, as elsewhere in its African possessions, to avoid conflict in the Southwest. The British were determined otherwise. By 1916, the last center of German resistance to the British and French forces in Africa was in German East Africa. The war had begun when the British cruiser *Astraea* had bombarded its port of Dar-es-Salaam. Hostilities continued until the armistice in 1918.

On the sea, the British navy lacked and concerted plan to deal with an aggressive German cruising campaign. In the Pacific, German maintained a small force of eight cruisers at Tsingtao lead by Admiral Maximilian von Spee. Though few in numbers, they represented a major threat to Allied shipping, particularly to convoys bringing Australian and New Zealand troops to European waters. Having difficulties operating in the Pacific, von Spee transferred from the Pacific to the South Atlantic, signaling the *Dresden* and *Leipzig* to meet him near Easter Island. The British intercepted his signals and brought a squadron into Chilean waters. They steamed into the Chilean port of Coronel and were attacked by the German cruisers losing two ships. This was the first British defeat at sea in a hundred years. von Spee decided to attack the British

Falkland Islands but was defeated by the British, terminating the high seas activities of the German navy.

With Turkey's entrance into the war, World War I came to the Middle East. At German prompting, Turkey attacked the Suez Canal, which Britain had illegally closed to enemy belligerents at the outbreak of the war. The British were well prepared and, though fighting lasted a week, only a single Turkish platoon managed to drop its pontoon into the Canal's waters. The only outcome of the campaign was to keep in Egypt a larger British garrison than in 1915. The third front opened by Turkey's entry into the war so alarmed the Tsarist high command that it prompted an appeal to Britain and France for diversionary assistance, and so led to the campaign of Gallipoli.

References

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