
Not to Lose the War in an Afternoon: The Battle of Jutland in German Context

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The Battle of Jutland is probably the most controversial naval battle in history. Frustratingly inconclusive, it satisfied few, and continues to spur debate to this day. Jutland was a battle of great expectations, missed opportunities, and greater disappointment. The stakes could not have been higher. A crushing defeat at Jutland for either side would likely have meant losing the war. However, the battle had monumental strategic implications. It led to the end of Germany's attempt to break the British blockade with conventional naval power alone. Instead, she turned to unrestricted submarine warfare as a way to counter-blockade Great Britain into submission. This decision, in turn, brought the United States into the war, and sealed the fate of Imperial Germany.

Most of the Jutland debate is Anglo-centric. A popular consensus in the English-speaking world is that after Jutland, the German High Seas Fleet ceased to be an instrument of any value, cowering in port until its sailors mutinied at the end of the war. In fact, the Germans followed up their tactical success at Jutland with further efforts to isolate and destroy portions of the British Grand Fleet. While these came to naught, the High Seas Fleet played a supporting role in U-boat operations and amphibious operations in the Baltic. Lastly, the High Seas Fleet had value as a "fleet-in-being," acting as a strategic counter against a British foray into the Baltic. Until the mutinies of 1918, it remained a significant force.

The Battle of Jutland is known in Germany as the *Skagerrakschlacht*, or Skagerrak Battle. The Skagerrak is the body of water between Denmark and Norway. Fought in the North Sea off the Danish mainland between Great Britain's Grand Fleet and Imperial Germany's *Hochseeflotte*, or High Seas Fleet, on 31 May–1 June 1916, it was the largest naval battle of World War I, and the last and largest battleship fleet action in history. Jutland represented the pinnacle of a traditional way of naval warfare, little changed from the age of sail—the Germans, for example, still referred to their battleships as *Linienschiffe*, or ships of the line. Future naval battles would take place in three dimensions, while at Jutland the dreadnought battleship—one of the western world's crowning technological achievements—held center stage. When dawn broke on 1 June, it signaled the end of an era. It was one more, if unlamented, casualty of the Great War.

The Great War had already been raging for almost two long and bloody

years before the British and German fleets met in the North Sea. This was largely due to the nature of the naval balance of power, which was itself the result of a long and bitter prewar arms race. It had all begun, one might say, with a book: Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*.¹ In 1890 Mahan, an American naval officer, offered a thesis on how great power stems from command of the sea. Taking a navalist, zero-sum view of sea control as something requiring a large navy centered on battleships, Mahan's writings dovetailed nicely with the imperial mindsets of the great powers at the time. Germany, as an up and coming empire, sought to create a battle fleet to rival those of the established powers.²

Germany's quest for a battle fleet with which to not only protect its coast and burgeoning maritime commerce, but also to show that it was truly among the ranks of the great powers, caused concern and resentment in Britain, which had long felt utterly secure as an island nation protected by the mightiest navy in the world. Now, as the twentieth century began, her position seemed threatened. While this may not have been the intention of the German monarch, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and his navy minister Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, the battle fleet they created helped alienate Germany from Britain. France, eager to isolate Germany politically, was quick to seize on the value of Britain's naval and economic power.³

In the end, German naval expansion was just one of Kaiser Wilhelm's many nails in the coffin of the Bismarckian system, which by its diplomatic intricacies had kept Germany's neighbors from uniting against her. By the early twentieth century, Germany was poised to become the hegemonic power in Europe. In the event of war, the German Army intended to seize neutral Belgium, a state created to keep any major power from controlling the best invasion route across the English Channel. Germany would therefore have found herself at odds with Britain no matter what the size of her fleet. A single dominant continental power—be it Napoleonic France or Wilhelmine Germany—was anathema to British self-interest. Nevertheless, the traditional Anglo-centric view of the *Kaiserliche Marine*, the Imperial German Navy, is that it was unnecessary—a “luxury” in the words of Winston Churchill—antagonized Britain, and was largely a product of Wilhelm's desire to outshine his uncle, Edward VII, and his cousin, George V. In any case, German naval history had an air of self-fulfilling prophecy: in order to keep enemies from blockading her into starvation, Germany built a navy, which by its existence made such a blockade more, not less likely.⁴

At the fighting core of the fleets that clashed at Jutland were two capital ship types: the dreadnought battleship and the battlecruiser. Characterized by a

uniform big-gun main armament (of eleven-inch bore diameter or greater) and steam turbine propulsion, dreadnoughts—so named after the first of their type, Britain's HMS *Dreadnought* (1906)—were more powerful and faster than their predecessors, retroactively called pre-dreadnoughts. Nevertheless, the dreadnought was evolutionary rather than revolutionary, as the trend toward an all big-gun armament had been apparent in naval circles for some time. *Dreadnought* was, however, a game-changer in the Anglo-German arms race, and both sides soon built ever bigger and more expensive dreadnoughts. Tailored for action in the North Sea, where operational distances were short and frequent mist and fog dictated battles at shorter ranges, the German ships sacrificed range, firepower, and speed for superior protection. In fact, the first group of German dreadnoughts, the *Nassau* and *Helgoland* class, lacked turbine machinery. The British had bigger, longer ranged guns and higher speed, but the Germans had thicker armor and better watertight subdivision.⁵

An important offshoot of the dreadnought battleship was the battlecruiser. In common with the dreadnought, the British-pioneered battlecruiser possessed a uniform big-gun armament and turbine propulsion, but, as its name suggested, sacrificed the battleship's level of armor protection for speed. The British intended their battlecruisers to perform two main roles: to protect the far flung sealanes of their empire by hunting down enemy commerce raiders, and to act as heavy scouts and flank support for the battle fleet. Theoretically suited for either role, the British battlecruisers were fast enough to outrun anything they could not outgun. The Germans, meanwhile, intended their battlecruisers—which they called *Große Kreuzer*, or large cruisers—to function in the scouting role as well, but given their North Sea focus and numerical inferiority vis-à-vis Britain, also stipulated that the battlecruisers be able to stand in the line of battle. Therefore, the German ships retained heavy armor but sacrificed firepower for speed. The battlecruisers were striking warships, and were the darlings of both the press and prewar naval reviews.⁶

Admiral Tirpitz had viewed his battle fleet as a fulfillment of his so-called “risk theory” in naval strategy: the British would not incline towards war with Germany because of the High Seas Fleet's deterrence effect and the potential it had to upset Britain's maritime hegemony in a shooting war. Without a doubt, Britain's declaration of war on Germany in August 1914, in answer to the latter's invasion of Belgium, rendered this strategy moot. Instead of submitting to German naval parity in the prewar years, Britain, spearheaded by its dynamic First Sea Lord, Admiral John Fisher, had met the German building challenge head-on. As Europe tumbled towards war, the British won the naval arms race. While

the Royal Navy in 1914 could no longer claim a two-power standard—a battle fleet as large as the next two combined—as it had done during the Victorian era, it was still considerably larger than its German counterpart. Against twenty-two dreadnoughts and six battlecruisers, plus three battlecruisers abroad, of the British Grand Fleet, the German High Seas Fleet, as the second largest navy in the world in 1914, could muster fourteen dreadnoughts and three battlecruisers, with one battlecruiser in the Mediterranean. The British also out-built the Germans during the war, commissioning a further thirteen battleships and five battlecruisers during 1914–18, to Germany’s five and three, respectively. Lastly, Britain greatly outnumbered Germany in other types of vessels, including pre-dreadnoughts and flotilla craft—though not, eventually, in submarines.⁷

Given Britain’s implementation of a “distant” blockade and the relative disparity of naval forces, a curious standoff ensued over the North Sea when the war began. In a prewar moment of self-delusion, the German Navy had convinced itself that if war broke out the British would implement a more traditional, and aggressive, close-in blockade of the North Sea coast. It is perhaps easy to understand why the German leadership wished upon itself such a scenario. It would enable the High Seas Fleet to whittle away at the Royal Navy as it hung about obligingly near German bases and minefields, before finally meeting it in a climactic battle on equal terms. This was not the last time in naval history that one side expected an adversary, by necessity, to behave conveniently. The adversary, in this case, Britain, of course did no such thing.⁸

Great Britain held other advantages besides numbers and strategy—geography foremost among them. Any cursory look at a map of the North Sea makes it clear that the German Navy’s position was in a maritime cul-de-sac. The British had no need to implement a close blockade of Germany. By simply placing a patrol line across the northern North Sea between Norway and Scotland, and another at the entrance to the English Channel, all the Royal Navy had to do was to sit back and wait for the blockade to strangle the German economy. The Grand Fleet kept watch over the North Sea from its base at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands, with its battlecruiser outriders based further south at Rosyth. The German position was unenviable. In the words of Professor Andrew Lambert, the High Seas Fleet had “no ability to get off the tactical battle space and win a campaign.”⁹

From the German Navy’s viewpoint, the situation was intolerable, especially when the army, Germany’s senior service, was sacrificing its young men in the hundreds of thousands. To say that the Imperial Navy labored under an inferiority complex would be an understatement. In three previous wars—two

against Denmark and one against France—the navy had been unable to prevent the enemy from blockading the German coastline at will. This rankled the navy’s officer corps. The plan remained to whittle away at the Grand Fleet, by isolating and destroying portions of it in carefully sprung ambushes. A tall order for a numerically inferior fleet under any circumstances, in the confined conditions of the North Sea it might well prove impossible. Nevertheless, the navy had to try. Honor demanded it.¹⁰

To make a difficult situation worse, Wilhelm, as supreme commander of the German Navy, was reluctant to risk his prestigious warships in action. By the end of 1914, the British had also broken the German naval code from captured signals books, and could intercept and decode German wireless messages. Unbeknownst to the Germans—who continued transmitting compromised, long-winded wireless messages to the end of the war—this rendered any chances of successfully ambushing British fleet units highly unlikely. The Germans were nevertheless fortunate, as will be seen, that the Royal Navy failed to take proper advantage of this intelligence windfall until after the Battle of Jutland. The Germans, for their part, could have made better use of their zeppelin airships as naval scouts, instead of sending them on terror raids against England.¹¹

Several smaller engagements between the British and German fleets preceded the great clash at Jutland. These were for the most part either inconclusive or German tactical defeats. The German warships outside the North Sea at the start of the war were, with few exceptions, swiftly hunted down. In the process, however, before its annihilation off the Falklands in December 1914, the German East Asia Squadron under Admiral Maximilian von Spee dealt the British their first real naval defeat in over a century, in November off Coronel in Chile. Meanwhile, the High Seas Fleet’s forays into the North Sea brought about several actions. On 24 January 1915, German and British battlecruisers fought an engagement near Dogger Bank. The Germans were out to raid the British fishing fleet, with the British forewarned of the German sortie from decoded wireless messages. Although the Germans dealt significant damage to the British flagship, the battlecruiser *Lion* (“the splendid cat”), the numerically superior British succeeded in overtaking and sinking the armored cruiser SMS *Blücher* as the Germans withdrew.¹²

Nevertheless, though costly, Dogger Bank served as a valuable learning experience for the High Seas Fleet. The Germans implemented its lessons in time for Jutland, and this helped to increase the survivability of German ships. Besides the loss of *Blücher*, the battlecruiser *Seydlitz* very nearly blew up when a British hit started a powder fire that burned out both aft turrets, killing almost everyone

inside. Only the flooding of the aft magazines saved the ship. The Germans blamed poor ammunition handling procedures for the near disaster, and after Dogger Bank made efforts to improve safety by keeping flash doors closed and preventing the stockpiling of ammunition in the turret. The British, obsessed with the virtue of rapid gunnery, did not. Also foreshadowing the Battle of Jutland, the British badly muddled their tactical signaling, and the Germans were perhaps lucky to have escaped without further loss. To balance the German fleet's losses, the British during the same period lost a number of ships to U-boats and mines. The most significant was the mining of the dreadnought *Audacious* in October 1914.¹³

In the same period that the Grand Fleet had one commander—Admiral John Jellicoe—the High Seas Fleet had three. After the defeat at Dogger Bank, Wilhelm sacked Admiral Friedrich von Ingenohl, replacing him with the cautious Admiral Hugo von Pohl. However, Pohl was terminally ill, and Admiral Reinhard Scheer replaced him in January 1916. Scheer, a fighter, convinced Wilhelm to permit him to use the fleet more aggressively, and with the Kaiser's approval, the admiral set out to seek battle with the Grand Fleet during 1916. It was no coincidence that the German Army was at the same time mounting a massive offensive against the French at Verdun. The navy needed to show it was doing its part for the war effort. This set the stage for the Battle of Jutland.¹⁴

The High Seas Fleet sortie which led to Jutland was actually Scheer's third attempt to draw out and ambush an inferior British force. Expectations were high as the German fleet raised anchor and steamed into the North Sea on the morning of 31 May 1916. Scheer's intention was to sweep north toward the southern coast of Norway, goading the British to send out a pursuit force—probably their battlecruisers under Vice Admiral David Beatty. A U-boat barrage off the British ports would first whittle away at the enemy force, after which the German battlecruisers—Rear Admiral Franz von Hipper commanding—steaming fifty miles ahead of the main force, would bait the remaining British south and onto the guns of Scheer's battleships.¹⁵

Unbeknownst to Scheer, the British Grand Fleet under Admiral Jellicoe—sailing onboard his flagship *Iron Duke*—had actually left Scapa Flow before the Germans left Wilhelmshaven. Radio intercepts forewarned Jellicoe that the Germans were up to something. The U-boat barrage, stationed off the British ports, also failed to pick off any of Jellicoe's ships, and all Scheer got out of his submariners were vague and contradictory contact reports, which told him nothing of the massive British force steaming down on him from the north-west. Already the German plan was unraveling, thanks largely to British foreknowledge of the

sortie. Sixteen dreadnoughts, six pre-dreadnoughts, five battlecruisers, eleven light cruisers, and sixty-one destroyers of the High Seas Fleet were about to face off against twenty-eight dreadnoughts, nine battlecruisers, eight armored cruisers, twenty-six light cruisers, and seventy-eight destroyers. Jellicoe placed Beatty's battlecruisers ahead of his main force, and it was the advance elements of Hipper's and Beatty's battlecruiser squadrons which first made contact on the afternoon of 31 May. Both sides' light units—sent to investigate a neutral Danish steamer—fell upon each other, exchanging the first shots of the Battle of Jutland. This chance meeting was probably fortunate for the Germans, as it did not give Jellicoe time to maneuver the Grand Fleet behind Scheer to cut him off from home before the battle began.¹⁶

Hipper and Beatty had faced off at Dogger Bank the year before, and there was an air of unfinished business between the two. Beatty, while aggressive and dashing, was unsuited to the discipline and technical skills required to command modern capital ships. Beatty belonged to an earlier age, and his cavalier manner permeated his command and would nearly spell disaster for both him and the Royal Navy. As soon as he spotted Hipper, Beatty swallowed the bait and raced south with his battlecruisers in pursuit. In the process, his lack of signaling left behind four brand new *Queen Elizabeth*-class fast battleships—“super-



Figure 1. SMS *Von der Tann*, Germany's first battlecruiser. At Jutland her gunfire destroyed HMS *Indefatigable*. Courtesy of www.history.navy.mil

dreadnoughts”—which Jellicoe had attached to his squadron. They eventually caught up with Beatty, but not before the Germans nearly destroyed him.¹⁷

The two sides' battlecruisers—six British to five German—raced south with Beatty trying to cut Hipper off from home, and Hipper, in accordance with the German plan, luring Beatty toward Scheer. Neither battlecruiser admiral was aware that the other side's battle fleet was out in full force. This first phase of the battle, the run south, was one of the German Navy's crowning moments, as its battlecruisers administered a dreadful lesson in accurate, high-speed gunnery to their British opposites. Beatty's six-to-five advantage in ships soon disappeared, as fire from *Von der Tann* sank *Indefatigable*, and that from *Derfflinger* and *Seydlitz* sank *Queen Mary*. The British ships blew up with the loss of nearly all their crews. Unlike the Germans who had learned from Dogger Bank, on the British battlecruisers, in an effort to shoot as fast as possible, the flash doors between turrets and magazines had been left open or removed with catastrophic results. Beatty's flagship *Lion* was also very hard hit, and would have suffered the same fate as *Indefatigable* and *Queen Mary*, but unlike her compatriots her flash doors were in place. Naval historians have criticized the British battlecruiser concept ever since. While their lighter armor made them less resilient ships than their German counterparts, at Jutland their losses were due to improper ammunition handling procedures and the less stable British propellant, rather than any inherent flaws in their design. For what it was designed to be, the British battlecruiser was a basically sound concept. However, the German battlecruisers were able to absorb tremendous punishment and were better suited for the kind of slogging match into which the Battle of Jutland developed.¹⁸

The four *Queen Elizabeths*—*Barham*, *Valiant*, *Warspite*, and *Malaya*—which Beatty had left behind, came up just in time to save him. The British super-dreadnoughts, besides being well-armored, carried fifteen-inch guns; the German battlecruisers had guns no bigger than eleven or twelve inches, and while both sides scored hits, the Germans received the worst of it. As Beatty's light units, scouting ahead, signaled that the entire High Seas Fleet was bearing down on him, Beatty finally realized he had been drawn into a trap. Beatty swung his ships about and the second phase of the battle, the run north, began. With the roles now reversed, Beatty sought to draw not just Hipper, but Scheer's main force toward Jellicoe and the Grand Fleet.¹⁹

Jellicoe, however, received no useful information from Beatty and had only the vaguest idea of the German fleet's whereabouts. On the other hand, Scheer remained fixated on an imminent victory over an inferior British force, and had no idea Jellicoe was ahead of him. Showing an extraordinary talent for

organizational command, Jellicoe, the antithesis of Beatty, ordered the Grand Fleet's battleships, steaming southerly in six parallel columns, to reform into one continuous line-ahead formation heading east. By so doing, Jellicoe estimated that he would bring his broadside onto the Germans as they appeared out of the afternoon mist. The maneuver worked to perfection. The High Seas Fleet, in line-ahead with its battlecruisers in the van, suddenly discovered a line of muzzle flashes on the horizon, over five miles long. Jellicoe had accomplished the highest aspiration of any battleship admiral—that of “crossing the T.” Jellicoe could bring his entire broadside armament to bear on Scheer, who could only reply with the forward guns of his leading ships.²⁰

The British possessed overwhelming firepower superiority, and in this third and fourth phase of the battle, the main action, the High Seas Fleet received a thrashing from Jellicoe's ships, whose gunnery, unlike that of Beatty's, was as good as Hipper's battlecruisers. Nevertheless, the Germans, while losing a light cruiser, were still able to claim two older British armored cruisers, and another

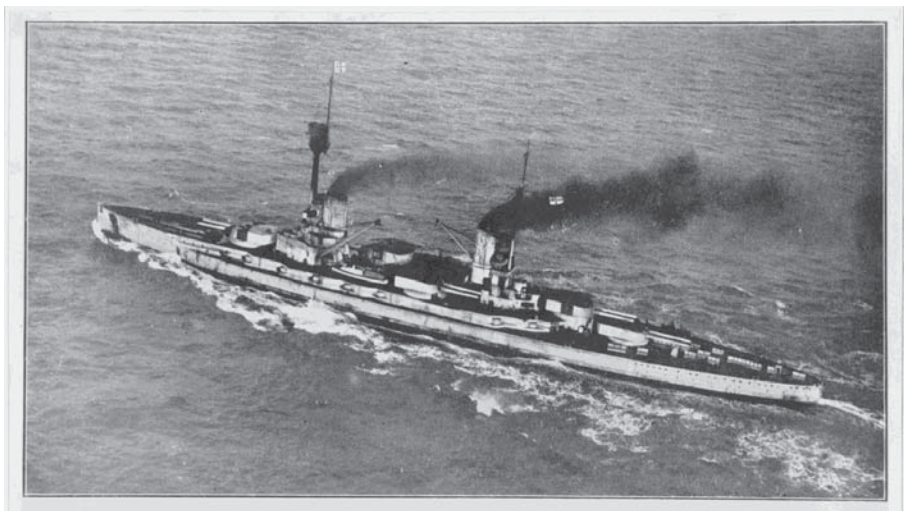


Figure 2. The *Kaiser*-class dreadnought SMS *Friedrich der Große*, Admiral Scheer's flagship at Jutland. Courtesy of www.history.navy.mil

battlecruiser, *Invincible*—once again lost to a magazine explosion. Scheer, onboard his flagship *Friedrich der Große*, quickly recovered his wits and ordered a maneuver that the Germans had practiced, and the Royal Navy had not and therefore did not expect: the *kehrtwendung*, or battle turn-away. By turning his ships in staggered succession, so that the rearmost ship became the foremost ship

in the line, Scheer reversed the course of the High Seas Fleet and within minutes disappeared back into the mist. The day was by now quite advanced and visibility, which had steadily deteriorated all afternoon, was diminishing. However, Jellicoe was maneuvering to cut the High Seas Fleet off from home. Knowing this, and thinking perhaps to slip north of Jellicoe and head for the Baltic, Scheer reversed course once again, but instead found Jellicoe crossing his T a second time.

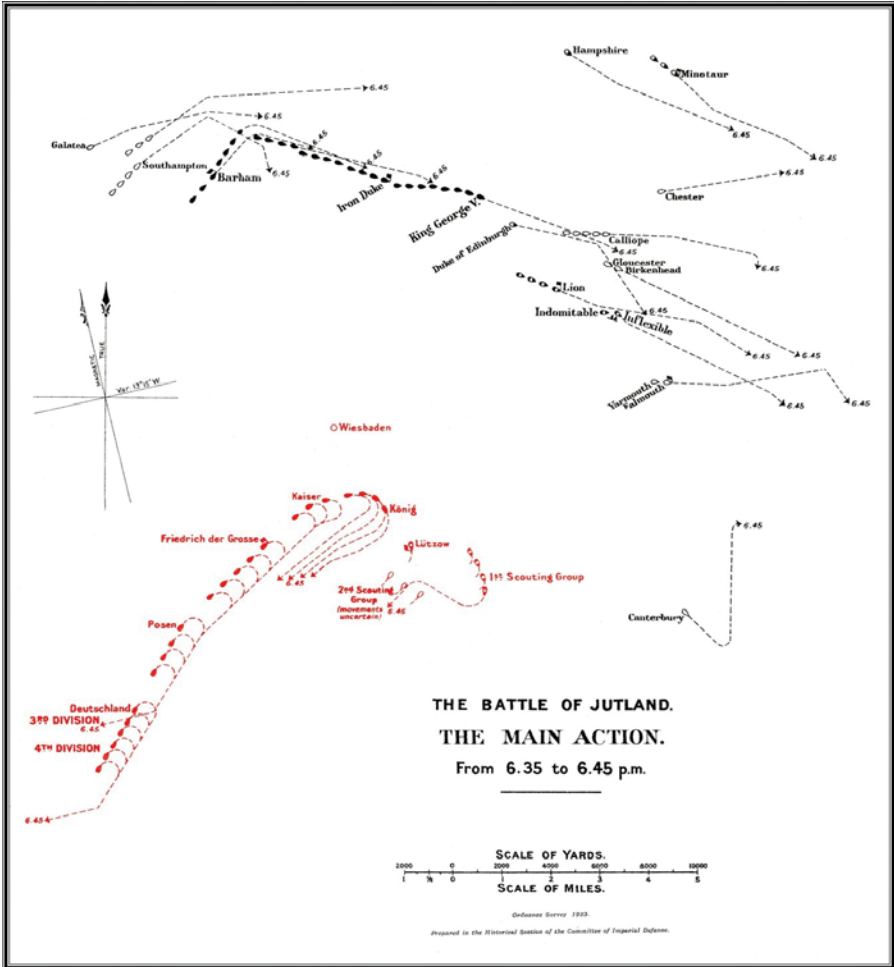


Figure 3. Chart showing the dispositions of the British and German fleets at the height of the battle, at the moment of Admiral Scheer’s first battle turn-away. Courtesy of www.naval-history.net

Scheer's decision to turn back toward the overwhelming fire of the British line was a dubious decision at best, and somewhat marred his otherwise effective tactical handling of the fleet. By now, the sun was setting, and the German ships were silhouetted against the western horizon, while the British ships were lost in the mist. Once again Scheer was pummeled by accurate British fire, performed a turn-away—more ragged this time—and disappeared from sight. To cover his retreat, Scheer ordered Hipper's battered battlecruisers and his light units, still in the van, to charge the enemy line. That the German battlecruisers were still afloat testified to the soundness of their design. Jellicoe's rearranging of the Grand Fleet, and Scheer's battle turn-aways, both accomplished under combat conditions without any collisions, also testified to both sides' flawless seamanship.²¹

Scheer undoubtedly knew that if the High Seas Fleet was still at sea when the sun came up on 1 June, it was doomed, and with it most likely the German Empire, whose North Sea and Baltic coast would be open to attack. The sacrificial charge of the light units and battlecruisers had forced Jellicoe to temporarily turn his ships away, to avoid waves of incoming German torpedoes. This gave Scheer some breathing room to consider his options. The overriding priority—for what had only a few hours before been a plan to cut off and destroy the British battlecruisers—was now survival. However, as night fell the High Seas Fleet had one last ace up its sleeve: it was a practiced night-fighting force; the Royal Navy was not. Jellicoe was reluctant to force a night engagement which would favor the numerically inferior Germans, so he elected instead to position the Grand Fleet for a daylight action the next morning. The British would finish what they had started when the sun came up, confident the Germans were well and truly trapped.²²

However, to the eternal disappointment of the Royal Navy, it was not to be. The High Seas Fleet gave Jellicoe the slip during the night, in the battle's fifth and final phase. Fighting his fleet through the destroyer flotillas stationed five miles astern of Jellicoe's battleships—which cost him the pre-dreadnought *Pommern*, victim of a British torpedo—Scheer broke clear to the east of the Grand Fleet, steamed south as fast as he could, and on the afternoon of 1 June was safely back in Wilhelmshaven with most of his ships. Mirroring earlier communication failures, Jellicoe's subordinate commanders, due partly—but not entirely—to German jamming, failed to report what was going on astern of the battle fleet during the night. Just as unfortunate for Jellicoe, crucial wireless intercepts, decoded by civilian cryptologists, regarding Scheer's intended route home—south-east to the Horn's Reef off Jutland, then south to Wilhelmshaven—were collected by the Admiralty but not passed on to the Grand Fleet commander. The Germans made what seemed a miraculous escape.²³

Hipper's flagship, the brand-new battlecruiser *Lützow*, was scuttled, and *Seydlitz* very nearly foundered, but through superhuman effort made it back to be taken into dockyard hands. The British failure to finish her off during the night, as she had limped impotently through their screen, was inexcusable. A number of other badly damaged German capital ships would take months to repair, longer than their British opposites. However, the High Seas Fleet had survived. The Kaiser crowed that the battle had broken the spirit of Trafalgar. In the final tally, the Germans lost one battlecruiser, one pre-dreadnought battleship, four light cruisers, and five destroyers. But they inflicted greater losses to the Grand Fleet:

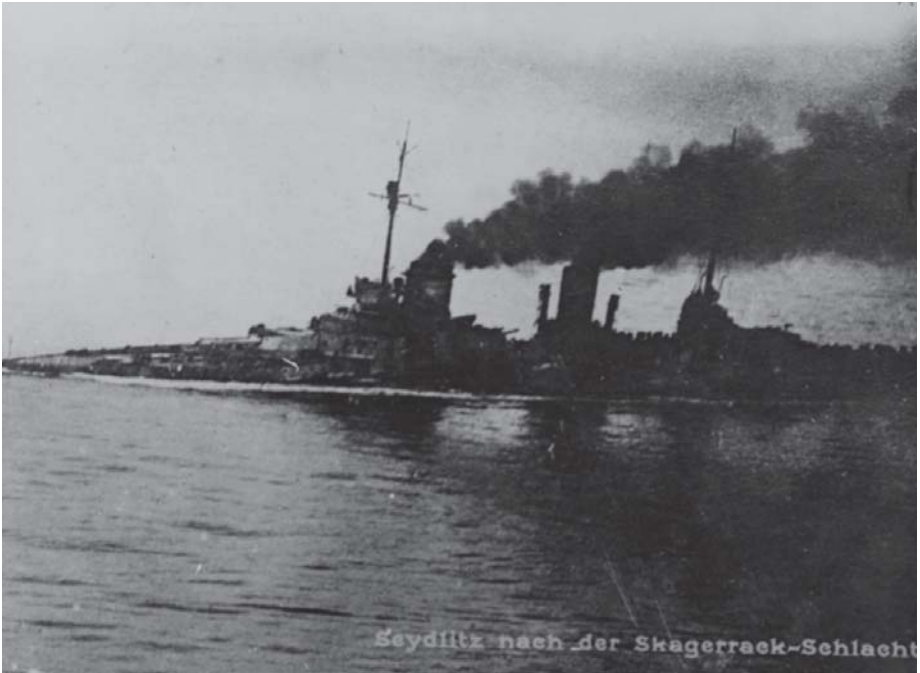


Figure 4. The battlecruiser SMS *Seydlitz* had the distinction of being the most heavily damaged ship in the Battle of Jutland that did not sink. This is her limping toward Wilhelmshaven on 1 June 1916, with her forecastle nearly awash. Courtesy of www.history.navy.mil

three battlecruisers, four armored cruisers, and eight destroyers. The Germans lost 2,551 sailors, while the British lost 6,094.²⁴

Strategically speaking, Jutland had of course not broken the spirit of Trafalgar. The Royal Navy had been master of the seas on 30 May 1916, and was still so on 1 June. However, the Germans, as the first to make it ashore, were also the first in print. Germany rejoiced at the fleet's apparent success, and letters of

congratulations streamed in from every army division in the field. It only gradually dawned on the German in the street how little things had changed, as the continuing British blockade, and Germany's failure to implement effective rationing, made food and commodities ever scarcer. The result of this failure was the deadly "Turnip Winter" of 1916. If only measured in terms of tactical success, Jutland would have been the victory that German propaganda claimed. Operationally, the fact that the High Seas Fleet had merely survived made it a victory of sorts; the same way perhaps that the 1940 Dunkirk evacuation is celebrated in Britain. Defeat at Jutland would have been just as catastrophic for the Germans as for the British. The High Seas Fleet acquitted itself well, fought bravely—even heroically—and exhibited the highest levels of seamanship.²⁵

In Great Britain, on the other hand, there was bitter disappointment and recriminations. The British had been certain that any major engagement with the upstart Germans would end in a repeat of the decisive victory at Trafalgar in 1805. But the fact was that the British fleet had not fought a major naval war in over a century. The battle fleets that went to war in 1914 were untested weapons, and this explains some of the missed opportunities that robbed the Royal Navy of the complete victory it was expecting, and indeed had within its grasp. The High Seas Fleet had inferior firepower, and with its inferior German coal was several knots slower than the Grand Fleet. Jellicoe's trap failed largely due to poor communication from both his superiors at the Admiralty and his subordinate commanders. However, Jellicoe did not need to win the battle of Jutland; he just needed not to lose it. Unlike his predecessor of the Napoleonic Wars, Jellicoe was in no position to take liberties with his enemy, whose fleet was a finely tuned military machine. Beatty attempted to replicate Nelson's panache, and lost a third of his ships as a result. The German Navy of 1916 was not the Franco-Spanish fleet of 1805. Jellicoe, in sum, fought the battle he needed to fight. While perhaps unglamorous, it ensured that the British blockade could continue doing its job of winning the war.²⁶

Contrary to popular belief, Scheer did not insist after Jutland that the High Seas Fleet never again seek battle. In fact, he sortied the fleet two more times during 1916—in August and October—in order to follow up the partial success of Jutland, and once again using Hipper's battlecruisers as bait. While these failed to bring decisive results—during the August sortie the two fleets narrowly missed each other thanks to faulty intelligence—the High Seas Fleet maintained the initiative in the North Sea until the end of the year. It was the Grand Fleet, in fact, which grew more cautious, being concerned with the growing submarine threat and deducing—correctly—that it was unnecessary to answer German

provocations. During Scheer's October sortie, the British simply refused to come out.²⁷

The Battle of Jutland proved to the Germans that there was little hope of knocking Britain out of the war with surface forces alone. The High Seas Fleet had inflicted substantial casualties on the Grand Fleet, yet the outcome had not made a dent in the British blockade. The Germans clearly needed a less conventional solution. Therefore, as a direct result of Jutland, Germany in February 1917 unleashed an unrestricted submarine campaign on Allied as well as neutral vessels, to strangle Britain's trade and knock her out of the war. With the U-boats taking center stage, a curious volte-face occurred in Germany's war at sea. The U-boats were subordinated to the battle fleet at Jutland, but the role reversal at the end of 1916 saw the surface navy operating in support of submarine operations. This was nowhere better illustrated than during the High Seas Fleet's sixth and final sortie of the year in November, when Scheer brought out half the battle fleet to cover the rescue of two U-boats which had run aground off the Danish coast. Scheer justified endangering the Kaiser's capital ships for two tiny submarines with the argument that the U-boat had become such an important weapon for Germany that the battleships were worth risking. The same logic played out one year later off the Heligoland Bight, when German attempts to cover minesweepers—preparing the way for a U-boat sortie—led to the last engagement of the war between British and German capital ships. Three British battlecruisers faced off against two German dreadnoughts in an inconclusive skirmish.²⁸

Germany's implementation of unrestricted submarine warfare was an historic blunder. The military leadership had undertaken no serious analysis of its potential effects, and bought at face value the navy's estimate that monthly sinkings of 600,000 tons would knock Britain out of the war in five months. Instead, after grievous losses and a thorough scare, the British implemented convoying of merchant ships, which sharply reduced the U-boat threat by late 1917. Furthermore, sinkings of neutral ships proved the last straw for the United States. On 6 April 1917, she declared war on the German Empire. American participation brought enormous industrial potential and manpower reserves to the Allied cause, and guaranteed that if Germany could not win the war within one year, she would lose it.²⁹

Meanwhile, the numerical and qualitative gap between the Grand Fleet and High Seas Fleet continued to grow, as the British commissioned battleships at a pace the Germans could not match. By the end of 1916, despite their losses at Jutland, the British enjoyed a two-to-one superiority in capital ships. Furthermore,

eleven of the latest British ships carried fifteen-inch guns, against only one on the German side, the new fleet flagship *Bayern*. Shifting construction priorities from capital ships to U-boats left a number of units, like the *Mackensen*-class battlecruisers, uncompleted. Furthermore, the American declaration of war in April 1917 brought the United States Navy into the North Sea, and in December of that year a squadron of American dreadnoughts was attached to the Grand Fleet. Given this disparity, the High Seas Fleet's only realistic geostrategic role was as a "fleet-in-being," which by its presence kept the enemy away from the German coast. The High Seas Fleet may also have helped deter British schemes for a sortie into the Baltic. The cross-Baltic trade with Sweden represented one of Germany's most important wartime avenues of trade, and had the British closed this off it would have knocked Germany out of the war. It is reasonable to conclude that the High Seas Fleet's presence—and potential to cut off the British line of retreat—must in part have contributed to the Allies' decision to focus their efforts elsewhere, like the Dardanelles.³⁰

However effective the fleet-in-being may have been as a strategy, it did nothing to ameliorate the battle fleet's idleness. With inactivity came a reduced sense of status. The naval leadership invariably siphoned off promising junior officers to fill command slots in the rapidly expanding U-boat arm, leaving the battle fleet with the sweepings. This mediocre "middle management," in the words of historian Lawrence Sondhaus, further widened the already considerable social gulf that existed in Wilhelmine Germany between the common sailors and their officers. In August 1917, the first mutinies shook the High Seas Fleet, and although quickly and ruthlessly suppressed, they did not bode well for the future. Partly as a way to solve its morale crisis, the navy in September 1917 dispatched ten battleships and the battlecruiser *Moltke* to the Baltic to partake in *Albion*, an amphibious operation to secure the islands of Ösel, Dagö, and Moon in the Gulf of Riga, on the northern terminus of the Eastern Front with Russia. Its purpose was to secure the coastal flank of the land forces and put pressure on the Russian capital, Petrograd (St. Petersburg). Excepting an abortive German operation in 1915, the Baltic had been the purview of light units and submarines. The Russian Baltic Fleet, with four dreadnoughts and four pre-dreadnoughts, was absorbed with defending the Gulf of Finland and the capital as a fleet-in-being. In any case, as the tsarist state degenerated into revolution in March 1917, mutinies threw the Baltic Fleet into chaos, rendering it a largely ineffective force.³¹

Albion opened on 12 October, as the High Seas Fleet provided welcomed fire support for German troops storming ashore on Ösel from improvised landing craft. On the 17th, and coinciding with landings on Moon, the dreadnoughts *König*

and *Kronprinz* engaged the Russian armored cruiser *Bayan* and the pre-dreadnoughts *Slava* and *Grazhdanin* in the Battle of Moon Sound at the northern entrance to the Gulf of Riga. The German battleships wrecked *Slava*, which the Russians scuttled as *Bayan* and *Grazhdanin* withdrew. By 20 October, Ösel, Dagö, and Moon were in German hands. Mines badly damaged two dreadnoughts, but the operation was a clear-cut victory for the German Navy. Its success also had significant geopolitical implications. The German threat helped Vladimir Lenin consolidate his position in Petrograd and usher in the October Revolution, under the pretext of defending the capital. *Albion* was one of the great amphibious operations of World War I. After the war, the US Marine Corps used it as a case study in its preparations for a future conflict with Japan.³²

The battle fleet conducted two more sorties in the war's final year: one in the Baltic and one on the North Sea. During March and April 1918, the dreadnoughts *Westfalen*, *Rheinland*, and *Posen* covered the transport of an expeditionary force to newly-independent Finland, to assist the anti-communist White Finns against the Reds in their civil war. The Germans secured Helsinki for the Whites on 14 April, and the only major casualty occurred when *Rheinland* ran aground off the Finnish coast. The Germans towed her back to Kiel, but never repaired her. On 23 April—coinciding with the German Army's last-ditch spring offensives on the Western Front—the entire High Seas Fleet, minus the three dreadnoughts involved in the Finnish operation, sortied into the North Sea toward the Norwegian coast. Admiral Scheer sought to repeat on a larger scale an October 1917 convoy raid, in which two German light cruisers sank nine out of twelve merchant ships. This time, thanks to bad timing on the Germans' part, the fleet missed both an eastbound and a westbound convoy, and the sortie nearly ended in disaster when the battlecruiser *Moltke* shed one of her four propellers. A resulting runaway turbine caused massive engine damage and left her crippled off the Norwegian coast. While *Moltke* was struggling home, a prowling British submarine put a torpedo into the hapless ship, but despite it all, the battlecruiser managed to limp into Wilhelmshaven after a harrowing two-day journey. Although the raid was a fiasco, it is telling that the Germans managed to tow one of their capital ships clear across the North Sea under the nose of the Grand Fleet, through waters the Royal Navy was supposed to dominate.³³

Ultimately, the High Seas Fleet's scattered sorties did little to arrest the sailors' growing discontent, fueled by idleness, boredom, inadequate leadership, and food shortages on the home front. The influenza pandemic made its way

through the fleet in 1918, adding to the misery of the lower decks. The last straw came in October, as Germany's war effort crumbled. Scheer, now head of the naval high command ashore, with Hipper as fleet commander, devised a plan to send the High Seas Fleet on a "death or glory" mission toward the Thames Estuary for a final, gigantic showdown with the Royal Navy. Scheer and Hipper hoped that the fleet's sacrifice might secure favorable peace terms for the German Empire. However, few sailors were very keen on dying for a lost cause with the end of the war in sight, and as the ships prepared to sortie on 27 October, unrest began on the battlecruisers and quickly spread to the dreadnoughts. Within a few days, the High Seas Fleet had exploded in revolt, with the sailors setting up Soviets, or revolutionary committees. The mutineers hauled down the ships' imperial battle flags, replacing them with red flags of revolution; on the dreadnought *König* the sailors rushed the flagstaff and shot the captain and two officers as they tried to defend the battle flag. The sailor's mutiny spread to shore, and soon the German

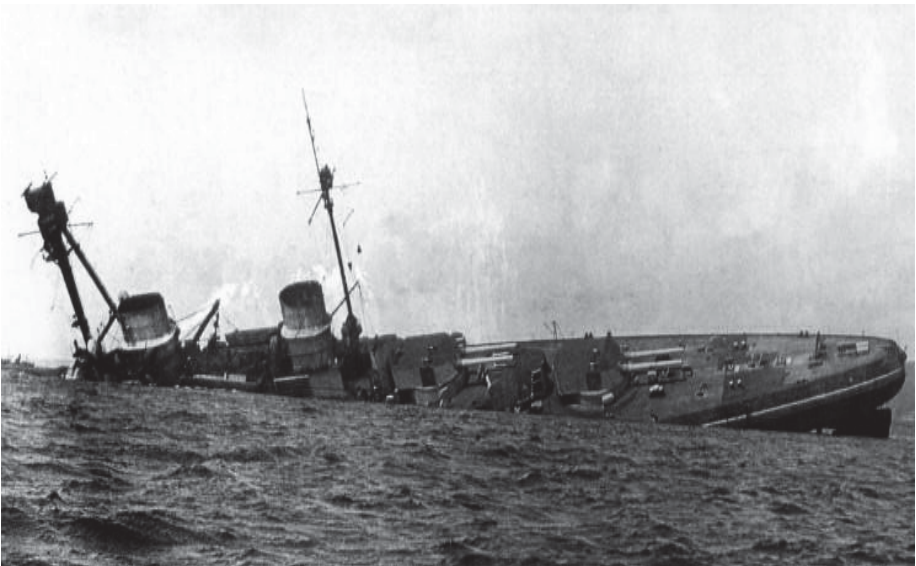


Figure 5. The end of the High Seas Fleet: the battlecruiser SMS *Derfflinger*, lead ship of her class, slips beneath the waves at Scapa Flow, scuttled along with the rest of the battle fleet on 21 June 1919. Courtesy of www.history.navy.mil

port cities were in upheaval. It was the final, indisputable sign that Imperial Germany was finished.³⁴

World War I ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918. Ten days later, the High Seas Fleet sailed into interment at Scapa Flow while the victorious

Allies debated its fate. As the High Seas Fleet approached the anchorage, a bombastic Admiral Beatty—now commander of the Grand Fleet—ordered the German ships to lower their battle flags and not to raise them again without permission. Beatty had no legal right to command the German ships to lower their flags, but Admiral Ludwig von Reuter, commanding the interned vessels, complied. However, seven months later, the High Seas Fleet raised its battle flags one last time, when on 21 June 1919, Reuter ordered the interned fleet to scuttle itself with flags flying, rather than see its ships distributed amongst the Allies. The Germans had carefully planned the action beforehand, leaving the British powerless to stop the process. As the German sailors abandoned their sinking ships and rowed ashore, British guards opened fire, killing nine unarmed men, including the captain of the dreadnought *Markgraf*. Fifteen of the High Seas Fleet's dreadnoughts and battlecruisers came to rest on the shallow, sandy bottom of Scapa Flow. The British were only able to beach the dreadnought *Baden*. It was the Imperial German Navy's last defiant act against the Royal Navy. Upon repatriation in January 1920, Germany hailed the returning sailors as heroes.³⁵

Winston Churchill famously remarked that Admiral John Jellicoe “could lose the war in an afternoon.”³⁶ The same was true of his German opposite Admiral Reinhard Scheer. Both sides risked losing the war at Jutland; neither side did, but the status quo continued to Britain's advantage and Germany's detriment. While underlying concern for Churchill's words contributed to the battle's indecisive outcome, Jutland nevertheless had tremendous ramifications for the German war effort. The unrestricted submarine campaign, which brought the United States into the war, was its direct offshoot. In 1916, the German Navy, through Admiral Scheer, tried its utmost to alter the balance of power—in the North Sea with the battle fleet—a force on which the state had lavished vast sums of money before the war to build—but realized in the wake of Jutland that this force on its own could never hope to break Britain's domination. After 1916, the High Seas Fleet assumed a subordinate role in German naval strategy, as the U-boat fleet became the weapon on which the navy and military leadership pinned its hopes for victory. Nevertheless, the battle fleet continued to serve a variety of functions, including defending against a potential British war-winning campaign in the Baltic.³⁷ It remained a significant strategic force until October 1918, and one that the Allies always had to consider. In the end, the High Seas Fleet had a final unintended but decisive effect, as its sailors' mutiny precipitated the fall of the monarchy and the German Empire.

Notes

1. Mahan's book is available as a free download from Project Gutenberg. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660–1783* (Project Gutenberg, 2004), accessed 7 April 2017, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/13529>.
2. Patrick J. Kelley, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), Kindle Loc. 1921–27, 3160–63; Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 10–11. As Kelley shows, Mahan, the navalist, failed to explain how maritime nations with small navies, such as Norway and the Netherlands, could nevertheless maintain a vibrant maritime commerce with large merchant fleets.
3. Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 8–9, 13, 15–17.
4. Kelly, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 477–86, 1355–62, 4187–91, 5698–5701.
5. Aidan Dodson, *The Kaiser's Battlefleet: German Capital Ships 1871–1918* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2016), 84–85; John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Random House, 1998), 280; Kelly, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 3087–3102, 3136–42; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 15–17.
6. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 79–80; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 15–17; Gary Staff, *German Battlecruisers of World War One: Their Design, Construction and Operations* (Barnsley, UK: Seaforth Publishing, 2014), 137.
7. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 7, 101; Kelley, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 2588–2607.
8. Kelly, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 3974–84, 4587–4600. The wishful nature of German prewar planning bears a resemblance to that of the Japanese Navy between the world wars.
9. Kelly, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 5644–47; Andrew Lambert, Lecture on the Battle of Jutland, 23 May 2016, accessed 11 April 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=l427CERpUgU.
10. Kelly, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 471–74, 509–12; Vincent P. O'Hara, W. David Dickson, and Richard Worth, *To Crown the Waves: The Great Navies of the First World War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2013), Kindle Loc. 1746–58; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 8–9.
11. Kelly, *Tirpitz*, Loc. 4839–45; O'Hara, Dickson, and Worth, *Crown the Waves*, Loc. 2772–85; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 120–21, 123. German complacency would resurface during World War II, when the British were once again able to break and read German wireless traffic—which the Germans had convinced themselves was totally secure.
12. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 105–7; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 123–25. Imperial German warships carried the prefix SMS, for *Seine Majestät Schiff*—His Majesty's Ship. Armored cruisers (like *Blücher*) were to battlecruisers what pre-dreadnoughts were to dreadnoughts.
13. O'Hara, Dickson, and Worth, *Crown the Waves*, Loc. 2223–28; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 160–64.
14. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 111, 114; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 127, 205.
15. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 115; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 43–44.

16. Keegan, *First World War*, 292. Reinhard Scheer, *The German High Seas Fleet in the World War* (London: Cassell and Company, 1920), 136–41, accessed 21 April 2017, www.naval-history.net/WW1Book-Adm_Scheer-Germanys_High_Sea_Fleet.htm. See Scheer's memoirs for the German order of battle, including supporting U-boats and airships, and the names of commanders.

17. Nicholas Jellicoe, "The Battle of Jutland – Centenary Initiative," accessed 11 April 2017, www.jutland1916.com.

18. Keegan, *First World War*, 284; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 45–46, 171, 222.

19. R. A. Burt, *British Battleships of World War One* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 277, 281, 284–85; Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 142–43, accessed 21 April 2017. The *Queen Elizabeths* were the most powerful battleships of World War I, and went on to perform stellar service in World War II.

20. Jellicoe, "Battle of Jutland," accessed 11 April 2017; Lambert, Lecture, accessed 11 April 2017; Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 151–53, accessed 21 April 2017.

21. Jellicoe, "Battle of Jutland," accessed 11 April 2017; Keegan, *First World War*, 295; Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 153–58, accessed 21 April 2017; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 277. *Invincible* was the victim of combined fire from the battlecruisers *Lützow* and *Derfflinger*.

22. Jellicoe, "Battle of Jutland," accessed 11 April 2017; Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 159, accessed 21 April 2017.

23. Jellicoe, "Battle of Jutland," accessed 11 April 2017; Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 161–63, accessed 21 April 2017.

24. Keegan, *First World War*, 295; Lambert, Lecture, accessed 11 April 2017; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 173–75. *Seydlitz*, as a ruse de guerre, flew a British recognition signal as she passed through the Grand Fleet during the night.

25. Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 175–76, accessed 21 April 2017; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 227.

26. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 128–29; O'Hara, Dickson, and Worth, *Crown the Waves*, Loc. 2507–11, 2746–54, 2783–87; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 126–27. German warships used superior imported Welsh coal stocks before the war.

27. Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 228–32.

28. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 172; Scheer, *High Seas Fleet*, 168–69, 177–78, 191–94, accessed 21 April 2017; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 228, 232–33, 271. Concern for the big ships in these kinds of cover missions was not unfounded, as during the November operation a British submarine damaged the battleships *Kronprinz* and *Großer Kurfürst*.

29. O'Hara, Dickson, and Worth, *Crown the Waves*, Loc. 2401–19.

30. Lambert, Lecture, accessed 11 April 2017; O'Hara, Dickson, and Worth, *Crown the Waves*, Loc. 3471, 5876–81; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 239–40; Alfred von Tirpitz, *My Memoirs*, vol. II (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1919), 77–78, accessed 21 April 2017, www.naval-history.net/WW1Book-Adm_Tirpitz-Memoirs.htm. The British *Courageous*-class battlecruisers were designed with shallow drafts especially suited for Baltic operations, but were never used in their intended roles.

31. Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 278–79, 290–92; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 101.

32. Keegan, *First World War*, 365–67; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 295–96, 298–302.

33. Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 322–23, 331–33; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 102–6.

The October 1917 convoy raid, made by the minelaying light cruisers *Brummer* and *Brense*, was one of the German surface fleet's most successful operations of World War I.

34. Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 341–46; Staff, *German Battlecruisers*, 191.

35. Dodson, *Kaiser's Battlefleet*, 141–42; Sondhaus, *Great War at Sea*, 348–49, 355–57.

36. Winston Churchill, quoted in Lambert, Lecture, accessed 11 April 2017.

37. Lambert, Lecture, accessed 11 April 2017. The British War Cabinet scrapped Admiral Fisher's Baltic plan in favor of Churchill's scheme to force the Dardanelles. An operation against the Turks was clearly seen, at the time, as the less risky alternative. It seems reasonable to conclude that part of what made Churchill's idea more attractive was the fact that, unlike Germany, Turkey was hardly a naval power, appearing to possess little with which to contest the Allies—her possession of the “ex-German” battlecruiser *Goeben* notwithstanding.

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