

GERMANY AND THE U-BOAT:
HOW NAVAL INEPTITUDE AND POLITICKING CRUSHED THE HOPE OF ITS
GREATEST WEAPON

Michael Scafide
History 489
April 2009

Copyright for this work is owned by the author. This digital
version is published by McIntyre Library, University of
Wisconsin Eau Claire with the consent of the author.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	3
INTRODUCTION	4
The Dreadnought Race	5
The Development of the U-Boat	14
The First Test of the U-Boat	19
The U-Boat Terror	23
The <i>Lusitania</i> Incident	32
One Missed Opportunity After Another	37
Trying to Break the Camel's Back	43
Conclusion	49
APPENDIX A	50
APPENDIX B	51
WORKS CITED	55
WORKS CONSULTED	56

Abstract

Germany entered World War One engaged in a heated naval race with Great Britain. The introduction of the *Dreadnought* by Great Britain in 1906 made Germany focus almost completely on the creation of a battleship fleet, instead of her fledgling U-Boat program. This paper follows the course of the dreadnought race, the early advancement of the U-Boat, the history of Handelskrieg, and three situations in which Germany was poised to harm either the British battle fleet or take the island nation completely out of the war with the destruction of its mercantile shipping. This paper looks at the important events of the U-Boat campaigns against Great Britain during World War One and analyzes just how close Germany came to victory on numerous occasions, relying solely on the U-boat.

Introduction

Germany spent the decade leading up to World War One in a heated naval race with Great Britain. The goal was parity with the British in battleships, and the other project Germany was working on, the U-Boat, took a back seat. From 1906 until 1914, U-Boats were an afterthought in both construction and potential strategy. This began a war-long process of German naval and political minds alike mismanaging the U-Boats and not using them to their full potential. On multiple occasions, Germany nearly succeeded in taking Great Britain out of World War One with her U-Boats, and on multiple occasions, the political ramifications that arose from the sinking of neutral ships, such as America's forced Germany's leaders to halt the campaigns, just short of victory.

This paper examines the reasoning behind the slow start to the U-Boat program, the early history of the U-Boat and submarines in general, and multiple times where Germany, through politics, naval strategy, or plain ignorance, failed to achieve the victory that was on its fingertips. I hypothesize on many of these occasions mentioned throughout the paper, that had Germany reacted differently on just one, or a combination of these instances, it could have won the war.

"When, as a little boy, I was allowed to visit Portsmouth and Plymouth hand in hand with kind aunts and friendly admirals, I admired the proud English ships in those two superb harbors. Then there awoke in me the wish to build ships of my own like these someday, and when I was grown up to possess as fine a navy as the English."

- Kaiser William II¹

The Dreadnought Race

To understand how it took so long for Germany to realize the potential of the U-Boat fleet, the naval build-up prior to the outbreak of World War One must be examined. A long-standing naval race already existed between the two powers, with Germany attempting to achieve world status through naval projection of force. No longer content with one of the strongest land forces on earth, Kaiser William decreed, "Our Future lies on the water," and that he "...must first get for myself a fleet."²

Admiral Tirpitz took over the position of State Secretary of the Imperial Naval Office in 1897, and immediately began a program of vast expansion of German naval might.³ On top of this, the Reichstag issued its Second Naval Law (through the persuasion of Tirpitz and the Kaiser) which in no kind terms stated that Germany's primary objective was building a fleet

1 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*. (New York: Random House, 1991), 151.

2 S. R. Gibbons, *World War One*. (London: Longman Group, 1965), 3.

3 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1973), 15.

capable of engaging the Royal Navy in battle.⁴ Tirpitz's memorandum pushing this strategy forward revolved around four main points:

1) The naval force should be built for the worst case contingency, because "that... naval force which meets the most difficult situation will be seen sufficient for all other situations."

2) The naval force should be aimed against Great Britain, not only because England was "the most dangerous naval enemy at the present time," but also "it is... the enemy against which we most urgently require a certain measure of naval force as a political power factor."

3) The naval force must be concentrated in home waters, because then, "it can unfold its greatest military potential between Heligoland and the Thames."

4) The naval force should consist of battleships... because "the military situation against England demands battleships in as great a number as possible."⁵

These declarations did not sit easily with the British admiralty. Understandably, the British "reacted accordingly; by 1906 the race to out build Germany in modern battleships was the most important and most popular element of British public policy."⁶ In 1897, when Tirpitz began his program of strengthening the Imperial German fleet, Britain had fifty-four top of the line battleships; Germany had a mere fourteen.⁷ These were comfortable numbers for the British, who were worried about

4 John Keegan, *The First World War*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 19.

5 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 15.

6 John Keegan, *The First World War*. 19.

7 S. R. Gibbons, *World War One*. 4.

France and Russia at the time as well, but not Germany, which had just begun to have global aspirations.

The Introduction of H.M.S. Dreadnought

The introduction of *H.M.S. Dreadnought* in 1906 drastically changed the face of the naval race for both the dominant Royal Navy, and for upstart Germany, as this new class of "all heavy gun" battleship made every other battleship in the oceans around the world obsolete; and caused Britain's naval superiority to evaporate overnight.⁸ Standard armament for battleships of this time consisted of four "heavy" twelve inch guns, supported by smaller guns of mixed calibers.⁹ *H.M.S. Dreadnought* changed all of this, relying solely on ten twelve inch guns as its main armament.¹⁰

This armament design was leaps and bounds ahead of other battleships around the world, as it maximized the destructive potential of the ship, simplified ammunition supply and gun repair, and, most importantly, made hitting targets much easier.¹¹ The reason for this is that with a single caliber of main battery, the ship's gunners would know if their shells were

8 John Keegan, *The First World War*. 259.

9 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*. 468.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 471.

landing off-target, either too short or too far, and could make quick adjustments for all of the guns. With a mixed armament, the gunners could not be sure if it was their primary guns, or the secondary guns, making splashes in the water; and therefore made targeting adjustments a much more difficult task.¹² This armament made the *Dreadnought's* firing power equivalent to two, or even three previous generation battleships.¹³

Weaponry was not the only aspect of the *Dreadnought* which made obsolete all battleships which were currently employed by the great navies of the world at that time. Until her launch, Great Britain's battleships of the time used reciprocating engines, which were known to break down after a mere four hours at full speed, which was roughly eighteen knots.¹⁴ The *Dreadnought*, like the greatly heralded *Lusitania*, was fitted with a turbine engine, which gave it extraordinary reliability and a top speed of over twenty-one knots.¹⁵ This allowed the *Dreadnought* not only to outrun any battleships of any make from any other great sea power, but it also allowed the *Dreadnought* to do so for a much greater period of time.

12 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*. 471.

13 *Ibid.*, 473.

14 *Ibid.*, 474.

15 *Ibid.*

The German Response

Tirpitz's strategy called for an Imperial German Navy that would force the British to come to terms with Germany over her global aspirations, which included establishing new colonial holdings, expansion of maritime trade, and the protection of both with a large navy.¹⁶ The navy that could do all of this, in Tirpitz's estimation, was one that could make a credible threat to Britain. "Tirpitz therefore argued that successful sea warfare... required a navy's weapons to be similar to those of its potential opponent. Because Britain had built a battleship fleet, so must Germany: only battleships could fight battleships with any hope of success."¹⁷

Tirpitz's reaction therefore was swift. It was too late to halt the progress already made on two pre-dreadnought class ships, the *Hannover* and the *Pommern*, and Germany faced another peculiar problem, as the Kiel Canal, the main through-way for German ships, was too small to accommodate dreadnoughts.¹⁸ Before Germany could begin building its own ships, it had to widen the canal, which it did in a year. By late 1907, Germany's first dreadnought, the *Nassau*, was sailing, with three

16 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 15.

17 Ibid., 16.

18 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*. 486.

additional ships, the *Rheinland*, *Posen*, and *Westfalen* being laid down.¹⁹

Tirpitz did not relent on the building program. By the end of 1909, Germany planned to have nine dreadnought battleships fully operational, by the same standard, Great Britain planned to have twelve.²⁰ This situation fit perfectly into what Tirpitz deemed the German strategy should be, also known as the "Risk Theory." "Risk Theory" was the idea that Britain could not possibly recall her entire fleet back to home waters, because it would leave too many of her global possessions unguarded:

Germany must have a battle fleet so strong that even for the adversary with the greatest sea-power a war against it would involve such dangers as to imperil his position in the world.

For this purpose it is not absolutely necessary that the German Battle Fleet should be as strong as that of the greatest naval power, for a great naval power will not, as a rule, be in a position to concentrate all its striking forces against us. But even if it should succeed in meeting us with considerable superiority of strength, the defeat of a strong German Fleet would so substantially weaken the enemy that, in spite of the victory he might have obtained, his own position in the world would no longer be secured by an adequate fleet.²¹

Therefore, Germany needed a fleet capable of defeating Britain's *Home Fleet*, rather than the entire massive British global armada. The task of defeating Britain's Home Fleet required a

19 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*. 611.

20 Ibid.

21 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 43.

number of ships that Germany could feasibly create.²²

Germany was finally in a position where it felt it could posture in a forceful manner with the British. Great Britain's position had fallen from a lead of 54:14 battleships in 1897 to a theoretical position of 16:13 by the summer of 1912.²³ Those numbers fit perfectly into the "Risk Theory" because Germany did not need to destroy the whole British Fleet during wartime, if it destroyed the Home Fleet, it could prevent the island nation from receiving the trade necessary for it to survive, as well as weaken Great Britain's overall stance throughout the globe.

The sentiment of having a battle fleet in order to be a great power was not a new idea in Europe in 1906, when the Anglo-German naval race began, however for Germany this was a direction they had never pursued before, and it was very troubling for Great Britain. "The introduction of the dreadnought created an Anglo-German naval race; and because the dreadnought obscured the political differences between the two countries, it raised the naval question to a position of central importance in Anglo-German relations."²⁴ Germany was presented a position it could not neglect; its aims of being a global power could now easily be met. Coercing Great Britain into meeting

22 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 23.

23 Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought*. 612.

24 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 23.

Germany's worldly demands could be attained through a projection of force, now that Great Britain had made its entire fleet obsolete. The score restarted at 1:0 in 1906, and Tirpitz felt Germany had to react quickly, and build as many dreadnoughts as possible, in order to achieve its goals.

This was the situation as Europe came to the brink of war following the assassination of Arch Duke Ferdinand in 1914 in Sarajevo.²⁵ Tirpitz's goal of coercion through the German navy required being like the British, in his assessment, not different than them. Therefore, creating a fleet reliant on the U-Boat, a weapon regarded as "a local defense vessel" and a "weapon of the weaker power", (which were some of the kinder terms the British admiralty gave to the submarine), would not suffice.²⁶ Germany's threat in absolute terms had to lie in a fleet similar to the British, and the submarine as a weapon of offensive capability did not lie in that equation.

Germany had missed its opportunity to build a submarine force capable of destroying British shipping at the outbreak of a conflict Tirpitz felt was inevitable. By being like the British, and aping their strategy and fleet build, Germany missed a grand opportunity to have large numbers of a weapon at the outbreak of the war that could have inflicted serious damage

25 S. R. Gibbons, *World War One*. 1.

26 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 25.

to the British merchant shipping. However, in Tirpitz's mindset, building U-Boats took valuable and very limited resources away from the construction of dreadnoughts, and because of this, Germany's most (at this time, still unrealized) potent weapon of war was hindered. However, Germany was still building limited numbers of U-Boats, and the development of the U-Boat underwent nearly as drastic of a change as the battleship.²⁷

²⁷ Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 14.

"I do not think that the importance of submarines has been fully recognized, neither do I think that it has been realized how completely their advent has revolutionized naval warfare... as the motor-vehicle has driven the horse from the road, so has the submarine driven the battleship from the sea."

-Sir Percy Scott to the *London Times*, June 5, 1914.²⁸

The Development of the U-Boat

The submarine was a still relatively new concept for a ship by the time Germany's first attempt at a submarine, *Der Brandtacher*, sank to the bottom of Kiel Harbor in 1851.²⁹ The only thing that saved the crew of *Der Brandtacher* sounded like sheer madness to its two man crew; in order to escape the submarine, they let in more water, until the point where the air pressure blew open the top hatch and they escaped to the surface riding a giant bubble of air.³⁰ It is understandable that after this experience, few naval minds in Germany would consider building submarines. The submarine had been experimented with as a weapon of war on both sides of the Atlantic, as inventors tried to make an undersea weapon capable of harming their opponents.

The first use of the submarine as a weapon of war came from David Bushnell's *Turtle*, which in 1776 managed to attack an

28 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 10.

29 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 26.

30 Ibid.

British frigate, *H.M.S. Eagle*, albeit unsuccessfully. 1864 saw the first successful attack made by a "submarine", as the Confederate sub *Hunley* managed to sink a Union frigate, the *Housatonic*, unfortunately at the cost of both the submarine and her crew.³¹ By the 1870's, navies across the globe were experimenting with submarines, and in 1890, Germany purchased the plans of the Nordenfeldt corporation (ironically based in Great Britain) and began construction on her first two subs, *W1* and *W2*.³²

1906 saw the first German submarine to carry the "U" tag, *U1*, reach completion. It was propelled by a 400hp kerosene engine for surface running, and a 400hp electric motor for the brief periods of time it spent under the surface.³³ However, as discussed before, Germany's launch of her first U-Boat was greatly overshadowed by Great Britain's launch of *H.M.S. Dreadnought*. And, as the kerosene engine allowed only for brief travels, the first U-Boats were attached to torpedo boat flotillas, which delegated their missions to coastal patrols.³⁴ Germany was not the only nation constructing submarines at this time, but due to their limited engines, as well as their "uncivilized" method of attack, navies around the globe saw them

31 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 30.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 32.

34 Ibid.

as defensive coast hugging vessels, not an offensive tool of war. "I refused to throw away money on submarines" wrote Tirpitz, "so long as they could only cruise in home waters, and therefore be of no use to us."³⁵

Indeed, in early twentieth century naval thinking, which was often modeled after the British, the navy that was successful (i.e. Great Britain's) was the one that took the offensive.³⁶ Before the introduction of the diesel engine into the U-Boat in 1913, its range was limited, and many viewed it as nothing more than a glorified torpedo boat, capable of submersion.³⁷ To Tirpitz, as well as imaginably the British, building a submarine was an extremely wasteful procedure, for two very important reasons; first, their range was so limited that carrying out a blockade or offensive mission was impossible, and secondly, their kerosene burning engines not only created toxic fumes, but their huge exhaust clouds made their detection easy for patrolling enemy ships.³⁸

The *U-19* class of submarines for Germany reversed many of these shortfalls. Tirpitz's decree that Germany had no need for submarines other than experimental, coastal defense, and reconnaissance missions fell on deaf ears at the Krupp-Germania

35 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 14.

36 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. (New York: Random House, 2003), 126.

37 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 13.

38 *Ibid.*, 14.

plant, one of the largest munitions factories in Europe at the time.³⁹ The *U-19* (and subsequent U-Boats in its class that followed it) had an operational range of five thousand miles at a speed of eight knots. Suddenly, Germany possessed a submarine that could sail at will in the open ocean, and could, theoretically, strike at the British navy, or its merchant shipping, its lifeblood, anywhere in the Atlantic.⁴⁰

Even with this remarkable improvement, Tirpitz and the Naval Staff still showed little faith in their weapon. The "Risk Theory", as well as over a hundred years of British naval history, had the German Naval Staff convinced the British, on the outbreak of war, would send their home fleet sailing full steam into the Heligoland Bight to engage and destroy the Imperial High Seas Fleet.⁴¹

This reliance on a strategy which was now over a decade old, (much the same as the German High Staff adhering to the Schlieffen Plan) did not take into account new technologies, such as the U-Boat, and their promising capabilities. Instead, the U-Boats were laid out in a screen on the Heligoland Bight, to serve as a torpedo firing defensive shield, whittling away at the British Navy until the actual battle, which would involve

39 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 34.

40 Ibid.

41 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 126.

battleships fighting battleships, could take place at a location and with numerical superiority of German choosing.⁴²

"The question as to how far our submarines were capable of rendering material assistance in the war had not been settled in July 1914," wrote Tirpitz, and because of this, his vaunted "...tried and trusty method of waiting to prove the military effectiveness of a new invention" hindered any thoughts of using the submarine as anything less than a defensive tool.⁴³ The outbreak of the war, however, would quickly change Tirpitz's stance, as the U-Boat quickly proved to the Germans, as well to the British, its awesome destructive power, and remarkable offensive capability.

42 Robert K Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 126.

43 Thomas G. Frothingham, *The Naval History of the World War*. (Freeport, New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1924), 29.

"Standing on the bridge of U-9, Otto Weddigen watched the ruddy glow of sunset spreading over the horizon. It was nature at it's most magnificent and it formed a dramatic backcloth to the sparkling white wakes created by the churning propellers of ten U-Boats. 'Speiss,' he said suddenly to the First Officer at his side on the bridge, 'you see how red the sky is. The whole world seems bathed in blood. Mark my words- England will declare war on us.'"⁴⁴

The First Test of the U-Boat

On August 4th, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany after it violated Belgian neutrality, (protected by Great Britain through treaty), which was disregarded by the German command staff as simply a "scrap of paper."⁴⁵ War had finally come to Europe, and Tirpitz's "Risk Theory" would finally be tested. German U-Boats waited anxiously in the defensive screen around Heligoland Bight, and the British onslaught, which the Naval High Command believed was sure was to come, never materialized.⁴⁶

The German Navy possessed twenty-four U-Boats capable of military service (U1 through U4 were of no military value) and had another sixteen under construction.⁴⁷ Of the twenty four U-Boats with military value, only ten were of the U-19 class and capable of extended tours outside of territorial waters, but the

44 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 40.

45 S. R. Gibbons, *World War One*. 7.

46 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989), 7.

47 Ibid.

sixteen in production were all of the *U-19* class or newer, and were capable of extended tours.⁴⁸

The U-Boats sat in two squadrons, around the Bight, waiting for German destroyers to bring in the British fleet into a hell storm of torpedoes. Certain that British prestige would not permit the Royal Navy to do anything less than attack the German fleet, their ports, and their shipping wherever and whenever possible in German waters, the entire German naval strategy was turned on its head when Great Britain abandoned its naval heritage and adopted a strategic defensive.⁴⁹ On the 6th of August, U-Boats were given their first chance to prove their worth to the German Admiralty.

A four day mission was given to the older U-Boats (pre-*U-19* class, because their commanders were more "experienced") to sail out and find out exactly where the British blockade line was.⁵⁰ The U-Boats, (*U-5,7,8,9,13,14,15,16,17,18*) spread out over a 60 mile radius to scout primarily, but if enemy warships were discovered, Korvettenkapitan Bauer stated:

The main object is to attack the main body of the enemy's fleet (dreadnoughts)... (and also to) attack all battlecruisers, cruisers, and light cruisers, which may be encountered, light cruisers only if opportunities for firing are favorable. On the return passage every type of ship is to be attacked and the enemy damaged by every possible

48 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 7.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 8.

means.⁵¹

Of the entire scout, only one torpedo was fired at an British ship, and that was by *U-15*. She was later rammed by a British light cruiser and sank to the bottom of the sea. Along with this, *U-13* mysteriously went missing.⁵² Of the ten U-Boats that departed on the scout-and-engage, two were lost, without sinking a single British ship. Other reconnoiters by the diesel engine boats proved equally ineffective, leaving the German Admiralty to state that "U-Boat operations will therefore be abandoned for the present."⁵³ Until the 30th of August, U-Boat operations were suspended outside of the Bight.

Initial Successes

Reports came into the Admiralty that heavy British ships were harbored at Rosyth in the Scotland, and orders were given to Korvettenkapitan Bauer to dispatch U-Boats to the area to attack any incoming or outgoing British ships.⁵⁴ On September 5th, *U-21* spotted and sank *H.M.S. Pathfinder* in turbulent waters, and recorded the first U-Boat kill of the war. While this was a great victory for the U-Boat captains who undoubtedly felt

51 Ibid.

52 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 9.

53 Ibid., 10.

54 Ibid.

unappreciated by the German Navy, it was *U-9* and her actions two weeks later that would change U-Boat thinking forever.

U-9 was a pre-diesel U-Boat, and suffered from the limitations of the kerosene engine. Commanded by Otto Weddigen, on the 22nd of September, it encountered three British Armored cruisers: *H.M.S. Aboukir*, *H.M.S. Cressy*, and *H.M.S. Hogue*.⁵⁵ *Aboukir* was struck first by *U-9*, and quickly began to sink. The other ships, as well as the crew of the *Aboukir*, were unaware a U-Boat had attacked them. The huge plume of water that rose from the *Aboukir* as it was struck was attributed to its hitting of a mine. The *Cressy* and the *Hogue* moved in to rescue survivors, per Royal Navy tradition, which played perfectly into Weddigen's trap.

U-9 repositioned itself, and sank with ease the *Cressy* and the *Hogue*.⁵⁶ Within an hour, *U-9* sent to the bottom 3 cruisers; sixty two officers and 1,397 men went down with them.⁵⁷ Weddigen sank the *H.M.S. Hawke* two weeks later, and within 4 months the British navy lost nine ships, including a submarine of its own.⁵⁸ Weddigen received the Iron Cross, 1st and 2nd class for his actions.⁵⁹

55 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 10.

56 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 48-52.

57 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 10.

58 Ibid.

59 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 53.

"The Fundamental error of the German position is the assumption that submarines have peculiar rights by reason of their disabilities as commerce destroyers!"

-Editorial to the *New York World*, 1915.⁶⁰

The U-Boat Terror

1914 witnessed the failure of the Schlieffen Plan. The German advance was stymied in France and it became apparent to the German High Command that the war would not be over by Christmas.⁶¹ The battles of the Marne and the first battle of Ypres saw the French Army stiffen and hold, along with the British Expeditionary Force on its flank.⁶² A new method of achieving victory was necessary, as the British blockade was already beginning to make its presence felt in Germany. The stunning successes of *U-9* and the realization of the U-Boat's extended potential quickly became apparent to the admiralty, and talk of using the U-Boats against British shipping became a much more prominent discussion among the German Naval High Command.⁶³

The British had surprisingly underestimated the U-Boat even more than the German Naval Command had. Regarding its own submarines, (and therefore, the German ones as well) as mere

60 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 98.

61 John Keegan, *The First World War*. 71-137.

62 Ibid.

63 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 32.

"local defense vessels," little merit or faith was put into the German submarine threat. Somehow, unknowingly to the German Naval High Command, a single U-Boat, *U-18*, sailed into the heart of the British home fleet at Scapa Flow, Scotland, and narrowly missed destroying up to six of its dreadnoughts, which had left mere hours earlier to conduct a sweep of the North Sea.⁶⁴

The terror that hit the Royal Naval Command and the decisions that followed were quick, and was the first instance where Germany could have taken Great Britain out of (or at the very least minimized its impact in) the war. On September 1, 1914, before the first British naval losses had even occurred, a submarine periscope was spotted inside Scapa Flow, the Royal Navy's port for the North Sea. Located 475 miles away from Germany's U-Boat bases, and thought to be untouchable by Germany's submarines, (since British ones could not make the voyage) panic ensued.⁶⁵ The Royal Navy, under the command of Admiral Jellicoe, which had luckily taken to the sea for a sweep, did not return. They sailed first to Loch Ewe in Scotland, and when it was felt that location was not safe enough to protect the dreadnoughts from the U-Boat, they sailed to Loch Swilly on the northern coast of Ireland.⁶⁶

64 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 11.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.



Source: "Location Maps for ScapaMAP" Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping, available from <http://www.ccom-jhc.unh.edu/scapa/sf-location.html>; Internet; Accessed March 29, 2009. (Boxes indicate Scapa Flow, in Scotland, and Heligoland)

The German Navy, which was bottled up in its ports in the North Sea, were blissfully unaware of the war-altering event. Believing Scapa Flow to be as heavily defended against submarines as their bases, no further investigations were launched.⁶⁷ For months, (from late September until December) the German Navy had complete control of the North Sea, its fleet could have ventured out at will to attack the British coastline, and it was no longer constrained by blockade; they were just too ignorant to realize it.⁶⁸ While still early in the war, (and

⁶⁷ V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 11.

⁶⁸ Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 27.

more opportunities would arise) this event became a hallmark of the German Navy: by the time the Germans figured out how close they were to affecting Great Britain, the British Navy had already adapted. It wasn't until February of 1915 that Scapa Flow was fitted with anti-submarine defenses, (two months after the Royal Navy returned to the base) and even here, in January and February of 1915, a handful of German U-Boats would have kept the entire Royal Navy bottled up in the same manner that the Germans believed themselves.⁶⁹

A few submarines had forced the most powerful battlefleet in history to abandon its base and retreat... gone was the "containing" position... The whole of the East Coast (of Great Britain) were left perilously exposed to hostile attack... the bottom of the whole strategical situation was knocked out for a time by the German U-Boats.⁷⁰

The Push For Handelskrieg

"...on the question of the use of submarines to sink merchant vessels..." wrote Winston Churchill in 1913, "I do not believe this would ever be done by a civilized Power."⁷¹ The British navy was so underwhelmed with the performance of their own submarines prior to the outbreak of World War One, and adhered so strongly to the cruiser rules of warfare, (any enemy

69 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 11.

70 Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 27.

71 *Ibid.*, 11.

merchant vessel about to be detained, captured, or sunk, had to first allow the crew of the ship to safely depart, and, following whatever action was to be taken with the captured vessel, the crew were to be brought to the nearest shore to be rescued) that no anti-submarine tactics were devised and no precautions were taken against submarine attack.⁷²

Likewise, Admiral von Pohl, Chief of the German Naval Staff, equally had his reservations about using the submarine as a weapon against commerce. Not taking on the crew of a captured vessel violated Article 112 of the German Naval Prize Regulations, and the accidental sinking of neutral shipping, especially American, could cause huge diplomatic strains, and possibly bring in neutrals on the side of Great Britain.⁷³ Furthermore, the Germans had no prewar plan in place for organized commerce raiding, and the number of U-Boats needed to carry out an effective blockade of Great Britain was figured to be at two hundred and twenty two.⁷⁴

Great Britain was the first to break international maritime law, by declaring the entire North Sea a war zone on November 2nd. Not only this, but Great Britain instructed all of its merchant ships to fly flags of neutral nations, an act the

⁷² Robert J. Art, *The Influence of Foreign Policy On Seapower*. 11.

⁷³ V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 12-13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

Germans decried as despicable.⁷⁵ Several senior officers of German High Seas Fleet Command recommended pursuing an unrestricted campaign on British shipping in a memorandum to von Pohl.⁷⁶ Von Pohl agreed, so long as the campaign followed international law. The only legally recognized way for a U-Boat to sink a merchant vessel without removal of the crew was if there was "persistent refusal to stop on being summoned, or of active resistance to visit or search."⁷⁷ The U-Boats began at once surfacing, firing their deck guns, and removing the crews from all merchant ships in the area carrying contraband (munitions or other cargo vital to the war effort) to Great Britain, France, or Russia.⁷⁸ The situation seemed promising to Tirpitz, who stated to an American journalist, "in a very short space of time" Great Britain would be starved out of the war.⁷⁹

The Declaration

The Kaiser had taken note of the success of the U-Boats in raiding British commerce. Between the first (unauthorized) sinking in mid-October of 1914, until February of 1915, the small U-Boat fleet had not only terrified and terrorized the

⁷⁵ V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 13.

⁷⁶ See Appendix A.

⁷⁷ Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 66.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 70.

British battlefleet, it also did the same to its merchant shipping. The early successes were enough for the Kaiser and the German Admiralty, who, feeling the strain the "illegal" British blockade were putting on them, decided to return the favor and use the U-Boat fleet to strangle the British.⁸⁰ On February 5, 1915, the first declaration of Handelskrieg was made:

WARNING! All the water surrounding Great Britain and Ireland and all English seas are hereby declared to be a war area. From 18 February all ships of the enemy mercantile marine in these waters will be destroyed, and it will not always be possible to avoid danger to the crews and passengers thereon...

These measures by the German Government are worthy of note by neutral countries as counter-measures against English methods, which are contrary to international law, and they will help to bring neutral shipping in closer touch with Germany.

The German Government announces its intentions in good time, so that both neutral and enemy shipping can take the necessary steps accordingly.⁸¹

Germany announced to the world that it was implementing Handelskrieg (or "economic war" in English) and gave the neutrals (most importantly America) thirteen days notice before full implementation. America immediately filed a protest concerning the safety of her merchant ships. British merchant ships had been hoisting the American colors as they entered

⁸⁰Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 81.

⁸¹Ibid.

British waters (to which America protested as well) and the German U-Boats had left them alone.⁸² However America was now stating it would take any means necessary to protect its ships and crews, and before the campaign even began, the Kaiser began reversing some of his statements, advising U-Boat captains to still surface if the ship flew an American flag, and to exercise extreme caution before sinking a merchant ship, contradicting the effectiveness the campaign would undoubtedly have.⁸³ Despite these reservations, the German Naval staff, and Tirpitz, signed off that they were convinced Great Britain would halt its blockade six weeks after the German Handelskrieg began.

Initial British Losses

Five weeks into the campaign, there were no signs that the British were going to relent. But, the U-Boat captains were getting better at stalking and sinking their prey, and as the months progressed it wasn't doubtful that they were beginning to cause a lot of concern in Great Britain.⁸⁴ Ships were sinking at a much faster rate than the British had anticipated; the weapon they had put such little faith into was becoming a thorn in

82 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 82.

83 *Ibid.*, 83-6.

84 *Ibid.*, 101.

their side.

British Merchant Losses, March-May 1915.⁸⁵

<u>Month</u>	<u>Merchant Tonnage Lost</u>
March	89,517
April	41,488
May	12,6895

The campaign was beginning to go incredibly well for the German U-Boats, until the fateful day of May 7th, 1915, when the world's most famous ocean liner became one of their victims.

85 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 18.

"'First tube-fire!'

The torpedo Lieutenant pressed the firing button with his thumb and U-20 lurched slightly as the first torpedo hissed away... There was a long pause and Schwieger watched the bubbling white track heading straight at the hull of the unsuspecting liner... Glued to his periscope Schweiger watched the explosion through the Zeiss optics as the tragedy unfolded with startling speed... Reluctantly dragging himself away from the periscope Schweiger nodded for the pilot to take over. The other officer stared through the eye piece for a few seconds. His face went white. 'My God,' he gasped, 'It's the Lusitania!' Schweiger almost pushed him aside as he grabbed the periscope handles. He turned it slowly to the right. And there, on the bows in great gold letters, he read the name for himself."⁸⁶

The Lusitania Incident

Jane's Fighting Ships and *The Naval Annual*, both books required to be carried on U-Boats to prevent the sinking of neutral ships, described the *Lusitania* as an Armed Merchant Cruiser (a ship that could be outfitted to fire guns in the same manner as a destroyer or other naval vessel could).⁸⁷ In fact, this was the case; on August 3rd, 1914, the Royal Navy commissioned the *Lusitania* as just that, making it a vessel of war.⁸⁸ Sadly, unknown to Germany, the *Lusitania* was decommissioned, however, it's sister ship, identical to the

⁸⁶ Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 18.

⁸⁷ V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 20.

⁸⁸ Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 24.

Lusitania, the *Mauretania*, was not.⁸⁹

The day the *Lusitania* embarked from New York on its final transatlantic run, the German embassy printed a reminder warning in forty nine newspapers, reading:

NOTICE: Travelers intending to embark on the Atlantic voyage are reminded that a state of war exists between Germany and her allies and Great Britain and her allies; that the zone of war includes waters adjacent to the British Isles; that in accordance with formal notice given by the Imperial German Government, vessels flying the flag of Great Britain or any of her allies are liable to destruction in those waters and that travelers sailing in the war zone on ships of Great Britain or her allies do so at their own risk.

Imperial German Embassy
Washington, D.C.⁹⁰

Germany was convinced the *Lusitania* was secretly carrying contraband munitions to Great Britain, and as such, when Schweiger spotted her off the coast of Ireland, the ship presented itself as a legitimate target.⁹¹

It only required one torpedo to sink the mighty *Lusitania*. Twelve hundred and one went into the deep with her, of which, one hundred twenty eight were Americans.⁹² Until Schweiger saw civilians jumping off the deck of the ship, it was assumed the few people seen on its decks were soldiers, and that she was going around the dangerous North Sea to transport troops to

89 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 529.

90 Ibid., 529-30.

91 Ibid., 531.

92 John Keegan, *The First World War*. 265.

France.⁹³ Before her sinking, America was equally resentful towards Britain and Germany for their actions revolving around America's merchant fleet, however the outrage towards this incident would cause a diplomatic uproar, as American opinion and wrath became focused on Germany's U-Boats, and not Britain's blockade.⁹⁴

The Halt of Handelskrieg

Former presidents Taft and Roosevelt called for war, along with a large segment of the Republican party.⁹⁵ While through careful political maneuvering Germany managed to keep America from entering the war, the damage had been done to its U-Boat program.⁹⁶ On August 28th, President Wilson was assured the German Navy would no longer attack passenger liners, which outraged the German Admiralty, who argued the campaign must either be halted outright or continued without modification to protect their U-Boats.⁹⁷ While the German Naval High Command debated a change in strategy, the attack on merchant shipping continued.⁹⁸

93 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 23.

94 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 535.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid., 536-42.

97 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 21.

98 Ibid.

The U-Boats sailed at will throughout the North Sea and around Great Britain, on average sinking over one hundred thousand tons of shipping per month from June through September.

British Merchant Losses, June-September 1915⁹⁹

<u>Month</u>	<u>Merchant Tonnage Lost</u>
June	115,291
July	98,005
August	182,772
September	136,048

Despite an assurance to Wilson that no more merchant liners would be sunk, two more, the *Arabic* and the *Hesperian* were, and three more Americans lost their lives.¹⁰⁰ The Kaiser ordered the new head Admiral, von Holtzendorff, to order von Pohl to pull all the U-Boats out of the waters around Great Britain, and that U-Boats had to once again adhere to international law.¹⁰¹

This marks the second opportunity Germany had to knocking Great Britain out of the war. Fear of bringing America into the war prevented Germany from taking Great Britain out. America had only recently began preparing for war by the time Germany had pulled her U-Boats back, and America's military was woefully unprepared for conflict.¹⁰² Great Britain, however, was seeing a

99 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 21.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid., 22.

102 Lecture Notes. "African Americans In WWI." Dr. Selika Ducksworth-Lawton. UWEC, April 20, 2009.

drastic decrease in merchant shipping, and by necessity had to use more of its merchant ships for war-time needs, instead of transporting needed cargo.¹⁰³ The U-Boats, with a continued campaign, possibly could have economically starved Great Britain, and the only thing that halted victory was fearful diplomacy.



JOHN BULL USES THE AMERICAN FLAG FOR PROTECTION—
From the *American* (New York)
March 1911

Source: "World War I: An Industrial War" University of Maine, Farmington, available from <http://faculty.umf.maine.edu/~walters/web%20104/ww1%20lusitania%20cartoon.jpeg>; Internet; accessed April 7, 2009.

103 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 21.

"There appears to be a serious danger that our losses in merchant ships, combined with the losses in neutral merchant ships, may by the early summer of 1917 have such a serious effect upon the import of food and other necessities into the Allied countries as to force us into accepting peace terms, which the military position on the continent would not justify and which would fall far short of our desires."

-British First Sea Lord Jellicoe, December 1916¹⁰⁴

One Missed Opportunity After Another

The U-Boats returned to operations adhering to international law in September, 1915, and continued on this course throughout all of 1916. While still sinking merchant ships headed for Great Britain, the task became much more difficult, as the U-Boats once again could not attack neutral ships without first surfacing and assisting the crew to safety before destroying the ship. The Germans, however, had taken to other activities. They developed and had a large force of U-Boats which laid mines, sinking over thirty seven thousand tons of cargo bound for Great Britain between June and early August of 1916 alone.¹⁰⁵ Germany also developed the *Deutschland* class of U-Boat, capable of going all the way to the east coast of the United States, carrying out missions, (U-53 did just this between September and

104 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 39.

105 *Ibid.*, 36.

October of 1916) and then returning safely to Germany.¹⁰⁶

Germany also continued with haste building her U-Boats, planning to have one hundred seventeen fully operational by March 1917, a huge increase from her original twenty four when war broke out.¹⁰⁷

Tirpitz had never relented on calling for a return to unrestricted submarine warfare. German U-Boats were still sinking over a hundred thousand tons monthly by March, but the Admiralty, and Tirpitz, knew the figure could be much higher.¹⁰⁸ Many U-Boats were transferred to the High Seas Fleet, and during June, July, and August a dramatic drop in shipping sank to the bottom occurred consequently.¹⁰⁹ On August 28th, 1916 Romania entered the war against Germany, and the war as a whole on land was going terribly for Germany.¹¹⁰ Von Holtzendorff, along with Tirpitz, had been pressuring the Kaiser since the first halt of the unrestricted submarine campaign to institute it again, and with these new troubling situations, the Kaiser allowed Holtzendorff to make his case on August 30th.¹¹¹ The call for unrestricted warfare was ignored once again for political ramifications; the only thing Holtzendorff managed to achieve

106 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 38.

107 Ibid., 46.

108 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 162.

109 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 685.

110 Ibid.

111 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 162.

was the construction of another 21 U-Boats.¹¹²

Had the Admiralty agreed to make as many U-Boats as he argued, the scenario that would unfold in 1917 would have been a much different picture. The number of U-Boats Germany would have by the time they would return to unrestricted raiding, in February 1917, nearly managed to make Great Britain come to the table and sue for peace. Had the Admiralty allowed for all of Holtzendorff's U-Boats to be built, the remarkable numbers of tonnage sunk seen later in this paper would have been much higher- high enough to tip the scale, and potentially knock Great Britain out of the war.

The Chance To Make Great Britain Starve As Germany Did

1916 presented Germany an unequalled opportunity to once and for all to eliminate Great Britain from World War One, and with her fall France would undoubtedly fall as well; and all that was required was unleashing the U-Boats to do what they had proven themselves to do best, which was raiding commerce indiscriminately. The wheat crop had failed globally, and with this situation, nations that traded wheat to Great Britain such as the United States and Argentina, for example, had to retain

112 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 162.

what they harvested for domestic purposes, and could not export any of the grain abroad, which greatly impacted Great Britain, as it relied on the importation of the vital grain.¹¹³ Before the crop had even failed, Dr. Richard Fuss, the director of a well known banking institute, in February of 1916 determined that if the U-Boats could sink six hundred thirty thousand tons of British shipping monthly, it would not have enough boats either to prosecute the war or maintain enough incoming grain to keep Great Britain fed.¹¹⁴ Even more importantly, Fuss, along with most of the prominent economists in Germany at the time, found that with the current shipping rates, an unrestricted campaign would bring Great Britain to surrender in as little as five to six months, giving Germany plenty of opportunity to prepare for any American response.¹¹⁵ These findings Holtzendorff presented on August 30th, and they fell on deaf ears, as fear of American and other neutrals response outweighed military opportunity.¹¹⁶

A restricted campaign was adopted, and the U-Boats began to excel, sinking on average over three hundred thousand tons of shipping destined for Great Britain during the last quarter of

113 Dirk Steffen, "The Holtzendorff Memorandum of 22 December 1916," *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 1, (2004), 215-224.

114 Ibid.

115 Ibid.

116 Edwyn Gray, *The Killing Time*. 162.

1916.¹¹⁷ These sinkings were largely carried out relying on the prize rules, and the U-Boats were not out in the ocean for extended amounts of time. Even more importantly, the U-Boat threat had shrunk neutral shipping imports during the same quarter to a mere nine hundred fifty nine thousand tons, down from almost three and a half million during the first quarter of 1916.¹¹⁸ If it was not for Norwegian shipping, which accounted for three fourths of the neutral shipping arriving in Great Britain during the last quarter of 1916, Great Britain might have met her fate prematurely.¹¹⁹

An analysis of Holtzendorff's memorandum shows both the rampant hyper-nationalism of the time, as well as a reliance on a single man's work to come to a conclusion of vast military importance. However, even with his reservations, the decisions and conclusions he made are sound. He looked at the entire picture, from the cessation of fats import to the stopping of iron ore from reaching England via Spain. He had asked for a beginning of the campaign in late August, and resubmitted virtually the same document with minor changes in December.

What is most important to garner from Fuss's and Holtzendorff's argument in August in the possibility that was

117 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 44.

118 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 39.

119 Ibid.

arising at the same time. Ships that were currently in England were refusing to sail out again, and ships bound for England either never left for fear of being sunk. Had the campaign began in August, like they both wanted, the results could have been much different. The trend as the quarters progressed was less and less shipping arriving, and it is doubtful it would have reversed.

For the third time, Germany missed a grand opportunity to eliminate Great Britain using only its submarines. The wheat failure across the globe presented Germany its most viable opportunity to take out Great Britain once and for all. It had the facts staring them right in the face; Great Britain could not simultaneously import grain and maintain the war effort if she lost an average of a little over six hundred thousand tons of shipping monthly. The submarines were in place, the plan was simple; sink everything you can and it will be enough, and Great Britain will capitulate, and the war would end. Fear of diplomatic reprisal, for the second time, stopped Germany from attempting to win the war. Holtzendorff would have his way in January, but by then, it was already too late.

"It is impossible for us to go on with the war if (merchant) losses like this continue... We are increasing our anti-submarine forces in every possible way. We are using every possible craft we can find with which to fight submarines. We are building destroyers, trawlers, and other like craft as fast as we can. But the situation is very serious and we shall need all the assistance we can get... They will win, unless we can stop these losses, and stop them soon..."

-British First Sea Lord Admiral Jellicoe to American Admiral Sims, April 10, 1917.¹²⁰

Trying To Break The Camel's Back

Holtzendorff and Tirpitz's cries for unrestricted warfare fell on deaf ears throughout the remainder of 1916, and Tirpitz resigned in protest.¹²¹ On December 9th the German command grudgingly made an agreement; negotiations would be offered to all the warring nations, and when refused, unrestricted submarine warfare could begin again.¹²² On December 12th, peace talks were offered, and on December 30th, both Britain and France refused to come to peace talks.¹²³

Holtzendorff already knew the allies would reject the peace talks, and on December 22nd sent his famous memorandum to the Kaiser, which he had already previously sent before in August.¹²⁴ The memorandum was received with a much more open mind the

120 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 50.

121 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 685.

122 *Ibid.*, 697.

123 *Ibid.*, 698.

124 See Appendix B.

second time around that the Kaiser read it.¹²⁵ Through much political maneuvering, the entire seat of power in Germany, with the exception of the Chancellor, was in full support of reopening an unrestricted campaign.¹²⁶ On January 9th, 1917, the Kaiser signed the order for unrestricted sinkings to begin anew. Holtzendorff proudly proclaimed "I pledge on my word as a naval officer that no American will set foot on continental soil."¹²⁷ The plan required immediate action, the U-Boats had to begin by the 31st of January, and it was agreed the announcement would be made on that date.¹²⁸

The Germans, out of economic their own necessity, were no longer afraid of the American response. This was the position they should have taken in 1915, when America was completely unprepared for war. A few months and an ill-advised telegram later, America would declare war, and Germany's hopes of achieving victory would be forever dashed.

One Final Push

The first two months of the campaign were a smashing success. Over five hundred allied ships went to the bottom, and

125 Dirk Steffen, "The Holtzendorff Memorandum of 22 December 1916."

126 Ibid.

127 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 705.

128 Ibid.

the tonnage that was sinking with them was very close to the numbers required for success. Even more importantly, noted the British with surprising alarm, was that much of the cargo sinking to the bottom was the vital wheat and other grain they needed so badly.¹²⁹ The sinkings, as the months went on, increased rapidly, to points far exceeding what was necessary to achieve the goals.

British Merchant Losses, February-April, 1917¹³⁰

<u>Month</u>	<u>Merchant Tonnage Lost</u>
February	520,412
March	564,497
April	860,334

The situation was beyond dire for Great Britain. A mere six weeks of wheat remained in existence throughout all of Great Britain.¹³¹ Even worse, noted American Admiral Sims, who coordinated the British-American war effort, was that upon Germany's victory, which appeared imminent, the surrender of the British and French Fleets would mean America's facing of a German-French-British combined fleet, which she had no hope of defeating.¹³² It was only the advent of the convoy, which the

129 John Terraine, *The U-Boat Wars*. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989), 40.

130 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 47.

131 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 726.

132 *Ibid.*, 728.

British had rejected outright the entire war, that would save Great Britain from surrender.

The Convoy

Korvettenkapitan Bauer, now an Admiral, issued these orders to the U-Boat fleet, in an attempt to make the British surrender before American naval activity could be mustered:

To force England to make peace and thereby decide the whole war, *Energetic* action is required, but above all *rapidity* of action... the sole aim is that each boat should fire her entire outfit of ammunition as often as possible... Short cruises, short visits to the dockyard, considerable curtailment of (routine) practices... During periods of overhaul only what is absolutely necessary to be done.¹³³

As the Germans were racing to shoot every ship spotted in their periscopes, the end became to draw closer. The British admiralty, along with the Americans, organized destroyer convoys to haul large amounts of provisions and supplies all at one time from the United States to Great Britain.¹³⁴ The added American Naval strength made this operation, which seemed unfeasible in 1915 and 16, suddenly capable. Beginning in April of 1917, these ships set out from America to Great Britain. There was a fear that the ships sailing in convoy would present the U-Boats easy

133 John Terraine, *The U-Boat Wars*. 22.

134 John Keegan, *The First World War*. 354.

pickings, however it was quite the opposite.¹³⁵ "The size of the sea is so vast that the difference between the size of a convoy and the size of a single ship shrinks in comparison to insignificance," wrote Churchill, "There was in fact very nearly as good a chance of a convoy of forty ships... slipping unperceived between the patrolling U-Boats as there was for a single ship; and each time this happened, forty ships escaped instead of one."¹³⁶

Germany's last gamble at unrestricted submarine warfare had failed. Instead of seizing the moment and beginning the all-out attack when the wheat shortage began, Germany fatally hesitated to assess the political ramifications. This six month waiting period allowed Britain to keep its head just enough above water that by the time the U-Boats were wreaking havoc all along the coast, the British and Americans implemented the convoy system, and the defensive shield of the destroyers nullified any advantage the U-Boat had. Germany failed, as well, to build as many U-Boats as required to maintain an effective blockade of Great Britain. Holtzendorff's U-Boats were only increased by twenty one ships; far too few to effectively hurt Great Britain after the convoy system began. The convoy not only brought in enough supplies to stave off starvation, but it also reduced the

135 S. R. Gibbons, *World War One*. 61.

136 Robert K. Massie, *Castles of Steel*. 733.

amount sunk. Germany had mismanaged its U-Boats for the last time, and consequently lost.

British Merchant Shipping Losses, May-July 1917¹³⁷

<u>Month</u>	<u>Merchant Tonnage Lost</u>
May	616,316
June	696,725
July	555,514

While these last figures demonstrate Germany was capable of destroying more than what was necessary, they also demonstrate the effects of the convoy. At what time the convoy would have been undertaken, had America entered the war earlier is a point of debate. But as woefully unprepared for war as America was (from a military standpoint) in 1917, it was much more in 1916, when Holtzendorff wanted to take his great gamble. America was far more ready to respond in 1917 than 1916 to the restart of the sinkings, and this preparedness and readiness to enter the war by 1917 undoubtedly helped keep Great Britain in the war.

137 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 53.

Conclusion

Germany had high hopes when World War One began. They would wage a glorious battleship encounter with the British, and after winning, would blockade the isle into submission. When this never happened, Germany found a new potent weapon in its submarine. However, politicking and naval ignorance at the highest levels hampered the weapon from achieving what was at first thought impossible; sailing to Great Britain and bringing its merchant fleet to its knees. Three times the Germans had the opportunity to either hamper the British battlefleet or its merchant fleet into a state of submission, and three times it failed. Unnecessary political maneuvering to keep America out of the war directly kept Great Britain in. If Imperial Germany had the resolve to suffer the consequences of American intervention during 1915 and again in 1916, more likely than not Great Britain would have been forced to acquiesce. If this had happened, perhaps an Austrian painter with dreams of Aryan supremacy would have never taken power in post Versailles Germany, and the world perhaps would be a much different place.

Appendix A

As England is trying to destroy our trade it is only fair if we retaliate by carrying on the campaign against her trade by all possible means. Further, as England completely disregards international law in her actions, there is not the least reason why we should exercise any restraint in our conduct of the war. We can wound England most seriously by injuring her trade. By means of the U-Boat we should be able to inflict the greatest injury. We must therefore make use of this weapon, and do so, moreover, in the way most suited to its peculiarities. The more vigorously the war is prosecuted the sooner it will come to an end... Consequently a U-Boat cannot spare the crews of steamers, but must send them to the bottom with their ships. The shipping world can be warned of these consequences, and it can be pointed out that ships which attempt to make the British ports run the risk of being destroyed with their crews. This warning that the lives of steamers crews will be endangered will be one good reason why all shipping trade with England should cease within a short period of time. The whole British coast, or anyway a part of it, must be declared to be blockaded, at the same time the aforesaid warning must be published. The declaration of the blockade is desirable in order to warn neutrals of the consequences. The gravity of the situation demands that we should free ourselves from all scruples which certainly no longer have any justification. It is of importance too, with a view to the future, that we should make the enemy realize at once what a powerful weapon we possess in the U-Boat, with which to injure their trade, and that the most unsparing use is to be made of it.¹³⁸

138 V. E. Tarrant, *The U-Boat Offensive: 1914-1945*. 13.

Appendix B

The Chief of the Admiralty Staff of the Navy Berlin, 22 December 1916

Most Secret!

I have the honour to respectfully submit to your Excellency in the attachment a memorandum on the necessity for the commencement an unrestricted campaign of submarine warfare at the earliest opportunity. The memorandum is essentially a continuation of the memorandum Ref. No. 22 247 I of 27 August 1916: *The Merchant Tonnage Issue and the Supply of England in 1916*, which has previously been submitted to your Excellency.

Based on the detailed information attached to this memorandum, I would like to ask your Excellency to kindly follow the line of argument laid out below, and I hope to achieve agreement that it is absolutely necessary to increase our measures against England as soon as possible to the very limit of our abilities in order to exploit the favourable situation and to obtain a swift victory.

I.

The war requires a decision before autumn 1917, lest it should end in the mutual exhaustion of all parties and thus in a disaster for us. Of our enemies, Italy and France are already so severely weakened in their economic foundations that they are kept in the fight only through England's energy and resources. If we succeed to break England's backbone, the war will immediately be decided in our favour. England's backbone is the merchant tonnage, which delivers essential imports for their survival and for the military industry of the British islands and which ensures the [kingdom's] ability to pay for its imports from abroad.

II.

The current situation in respect to the merchant tonnage has already been mentioned in the memorandum of 27 August and is laid out in further detail in the attachment. In all brevity the situation is as follows: The [shipping] rates have reached outrageous levels, often as much as ten times as much [as in peacetime] for many important goods. We know with certainty from a variety of sources that merchant tonnage is lacking everywhere.

The current English merchant tonnage can safely be assumed to be in the order of 20 million gross register tons. 8.6 million tons of these are requisitioned for military purposes, and 1/2 million is employed in coastal trade. Approximately 1 million [tons] are undergoing repairs or are otherwise temporarily unavailable. Approximately 2 million tons are sailing for other allies, which leaves about 8 million tons of English merchant tonnage to provide for the supply of England. An analysis of statistical figures of ship movements in British ports suggests an even lower figure. In the months of July - September 1916 only 6 3/4 million tons were employed in the trade with England. In addition to that, other tonnage sailing in the trade with England can be assumed to amount to

around 900,000 tons of enemy - non-English - and approximately 3 million tons of neutral tonnage. Hence, no more than 10 3/4 million GRT are at the disposal for the supply of England.

III.

If the achievements in our battle against merchant tonnage have been encouraging thus far, then the exceptionally poor world harvest of grain, including feed grain, this year provides us with a unique opportunity, which nobody could responsibly reject. Both North America and Canada will probably cease their grain exports to England in February. Then that country will have to draw its grain supplies from the more distant Argentina, but since Argentina will only be able to deliver very limited quantities, because of the poor harvest, England will have to turn to India and mostly Australia. In the attachment it is explained in detail how such an increase in the length of the grain routes will require an extra 720,000 tons of tonnage for the grain shipments alone. In practice, the implications will be that, until August 1917, 3/4 million tons of the available 10 3/4 million tons will have to be employed for a service, which had hitherto not been required.

IV.

Under such favourable circumstances an energetic blow conducted with all force against English merchant tonnage will promise a certain success in a way that I have to reiterate and emphasize my statements made on 27 August 1916 that "our clearly defined strategic objective is to force a decision in our favour through the destruction of [enemy] sea transport capacity" and also that "from a military point of view it would be irresponsible not to make use of the submarine weapon now." As things stand at the moment, I cannot vouch that a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare will force England to make peace within five months time. This reservation needs to be made in respect to the unrestricted submarine warfare only. Of the currently conducted submarine warfare under cruiser a decisive result cannot be expected, regardless of the circumstances, even if all armed merchantmen are designated as legitimate targets.

V.

Based on a monthly rate of destruction of 600,000 tons of shipping through a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, as pointed out previously, and on the well grounded expectation, elaborated upon in the attachment, that at least two fifths of the neutral tonnage sailing in the trade with England will be deterred by such a campaign, it stands to reason that the current volume English sea borne trade will be reduced by 39% within five months. This would not be bearable for England, neither in view of her future position after the war, nor in view of her ability to continue the war effort. Already, the country is at the verge of a food crisis, which will soon compel it to attempt to undertake the same food rationing measures, which we, as a blockaded country, have been forced to adopt since the outbreak of the war. The preconditions for implementing such measures are totally different and infinitely more unfavourable than in our case. They do not have the necessary administration and their population is unused to submitting to such privations. Then there is another reason why the uniform rationing of bread for the whole population will not be possible in England at this point. It was possible for Germany

at a time in which bread could be substituted by other foodstuffs. That moment has been missed in England. But with only three fifths of the current sea borne trade, the continued supply with [alternative] foodstuffs cannot be maintained unless a severe rationing of grain is imposed--provided the war industry is to be maintained at its current output level. The objection that England could have sufficient domestic stockpiles of grain and raw materials has been disproved in detail in the attachment.

In addition to that, the unrestricted submarine campaign would cut off England from the trade with Denmark and Holland, which would result in an immediate shortage of fats, since one third of all butter imports and the entire margarine imports to England originate in Denmark and Holland respectively. Moreover, by threatening the sea routes to Scandinavia and intensifying activities against the Spanish iron-ore trade, it would result in a scarcity of iron-ore and wood. This will automatically reduce the coal production for lack of wood. In consequence it would also reduce the output of pig iron, steel, and subsequently the production of munitions, which depends on both. Finally, it gives us the long hoped for opportunity to strike at neutral munitions shipments, and thus it will also provide a relief for the army.

By contrast, a submarine campaign according to cruiser rules, even assuming the possibility of indiscriminate attacks on armed merchantmen, would only yield a reduction of the tonnage sailing for England by 5 x 400,000 tons--about 18%--or less than half of what could be achieved by unrestricted submarine warfare. Experience so far does not suggest that the authorization to torpedo armed merchantmen would improve upon the result of 400,000 tons of destroyed merchant tonnage, which has been achieved over the past two months. In fact, it is likely to merely compensate for a decline, which has to be expected in the course of progressing arming [of merchantmen]. I am aware that even a reduction of one fifth of English sea borne trade will have a severe impact on the English supply situation. However, I consider it unthinkable that the current English leadership under Lloyd George, who is absolutely determined, could be forced to make peace on these grounds, particularly since the constraints of fat, iron-ore, and wood scarcity--and the latter's impact on the munitions production-- would not come into effect. Furthermore, the psychological effects of panic and terror cannot be exploited. These effects, which can only be achieved by a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare are, in my view, an indispensable prerequisite for success. Just how important they are can be judged by the experiences made when we initiated submarine warfare in early 1915, or even during the brief period of the submarine campaign in March and April 1916, when the British believed that we were serious about it.

A further precondition [for success] is that the beginning and the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare should coincide in a manner that leaves no room for negotiations, particularly between England and the neutrals. Only then will the effect of shock have the most profound impact on the enemy and the neutrals.

VI.

Upon the declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare the United States

government will once more be compelled to make a decision whether or not to take the consequences of its previous position vis-à-vis the unrestricted submarine warfare. I am absolutely of the opinion that war with the United States is such a serious matter that everything has to be undertaken to avoid it. Fear of a diplomatic rupture however, should not lead us to recoil from the use of a weapon that promises victory for us.

At any rate, it is realistic to assume the worst case as the most probable one and to consider, which impact an American entry into the war on the side of our enemies would have on the course of the war. In respect to the merchant tonnage this impact is likely to be negligible. It cannot be expected that more than a fraction of the interned central power tonnage in American--and perhaps in other neutral ports--can be put into the trade with England at short notice. The overwhelming part of it can be rendered useless in a manner that it will be unable to sail during the first, critical months. All preparations in this respect have been made. Also, there would be no crews available in the initial stages. The American troops would be of equally little import, if only for the lack of bottoms to carry them over here in great numbers; the same applies to American money, which cannot compensate the lack of tonnage. The only question that remains would be how America would react to a peace, which Great Britain would be forced to accept. It is unlikely that it would decide to continue the war against us, since it has no means to strike at us decisively, whereas its sea borne commerce would suffer from our submarines. Indeed, it is to be expected that it will join England in making peace, in order to restore healthy economic conditions.

Therefore my conclusion is that a campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, launched in time to produce a peace before the harvest of the summer 1917--i.e. 1 August--has to accept the risk of American belligerence, because we have no other option. In spite of the diplomatic rupture with America, the unrestricted submarine warfare is nevertheless the right means to conclude this war victoriously. It is also the only means to this end.

VII.

Since I have declared the time come to strike against England in autumn 1916 the situation has even improved tremendously in our favour. The crop failure, in conjunction with the impact of the war on England up to now, gives us the opportunity to force a decision before the next harvest. If we do not make use of what seems to be the last chance, then I see no other option than that of mutual exhaustion, without our succeeding to bring the war to an end on terms that will guarantee our future as a world power.

In order to achieve the required results, the unrestricted submarine warfare has to commence no later than 1 February. I request from your Excellency an indication, whether the military situation on the continent, particularly in regard to the remaining neutrals, would allow this schedule. The necessary preparations can be completed within three weeks time. (Signed) von Holtzendorff¹³⁹

139 Dirk Steffen, "The Holtzendorff Memorandum of 22 December 1916."

Works Cited

Primary Sources

Steffen, Dirk. "The Holtzendorff Memorandum 22 December 1916 and Germany's Declaration of Unrestricted U-Boat Warfare." *The Journal of Military History* 68, no. 1 (2004): 215-224.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397253> (accessed March 28, 2009).

Secondary Sources

Art, Robert J. *The Influence of Foreign Policy on Seapower*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1973.

Frothingham, Thomas G. *Naval History of the World War 1914-1915*. Freeport: Books For Libraries Press, 1971.

Gibbons, S. R., and P. Morican. *World War One*. London: Longman Group Limited, 1971.

Gray, Edwyn A. *The Killing Time*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972.

Keegan, John. *The First World War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

Massie, Robert K. *Castles of Steel*. New York: Random House, 2003.

Massie, Robert K. *Dreadnought*. New York: Random House, 1991.

Tarrant, V. E. *The U-Boat Offensive 1914-1945*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1989.

Terraine, John. *The U-Boat Wars 1916-1945*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1989.

Works Consulted

Primary Sources

Ludendorff, Erich. *Ludendorff's Own Story*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books For Libraries Press, 1970.

Tirpitz, Alfred von. *My Memoirs*. New York: AMS Press, 1970.

Wegener, Vice Admiral Wolfgang. *The Naval Strategy of the World War*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1929.

Secondary Sources

Coletta, Paolo E. *Sea Power in the Atlantic and Mediterranean in World War One*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1989.

Compton-Hall, Richard. *Submarines and the War at Sea 1914-1918*. London: Macmillan, 1991.

Feldman, Gerald D. *German Imperialism 1914-1918*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1972.

Gray, Edwyn A. *The Underwater War*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.