100 years onward, we can learn from the Battle of Jutland

by Conrad Black

The 100th anniversary of the Battle of Jutland, surpassed only by the various actions of the Battle of Leyte Gulf in 1944 as the greatest naval battle in world history, passed almost unobserved last week. This engagement, as much as any of the great land battles of the Western Front in the First World War, except perhaps for the first Battle of the Marne, could have determined the outcome of the war.

The German High Seas Fleet, commanded by Admiral Reinhard Scheer, left port preceded by a squadron of battlecruisers (the same size and firepower as battleships, but with less armour and thus greater speed), seeking to attract a sizeable British squadron under the guns of Germany's main battle fleet. The plan initially succeeded, as Admiral David Beatty's battlecruisers and four battleships gave chase to the German advance force, commanded by Admiral Franz Hipper, which retreated into Scheer's fleet. Beatty lost two large ships before turning toward home. Unknown to the Germans, the British had picked up signals indicating a planned German fleet action, and the British Grand Fleet, commanded by Admiral John Jellicoe, had sailed after Beatty. The roles of Beatty and Scheer were now reversed, as Beatty drew Scheer's entire German navy into the fire of the Royal Navy's Home Fleet. It was Scheer's turn to withdraw.

The British had the formidable force of 45 battleships and battlecruisers, to 27 comparable German ships, and there were hundreds of smaller craft. Scheer executed a skillful retreat, though there were two fierce exchanges of fire between a large

number of the big ships before darkness descended on May 31, 1916. Jellicoe tried through the night to intercept the German fleet, but Scheer, with some night skirmishing, made good his retreat. On the day and night action, the British had lost 14 ships of 113,000 tons and more than 6,000 dead against German losses of 11 ships of 62,000 tons and 2,500 dead. This was a tactical German victory, but a British strategic victory, as it did not materially alter the correlation of forces between the navies and the German navy never sailed again, except to surrender after the Armistice.

Charles McQuillan / Getty ImagesServicemen prepare for a service aboard HMS Caroline in front of a banner of the ship on May 31 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. HMS Caroline is the last surviving ship from the Battle of Jutland.

At the end of the war, Scheer and Hipper made a desperate play to put to sea in an all-or-nothing gamble for control of the North Sea. Their fleet mutinied and refused to sail, having participated actively in the 1914-1918 war for only two days. The fleet sailed to surrender at Scapa Flow, the home base of the British Grand Fleet. Eventually, skeleton crews scuttled the German fleet in the deep Scottish anchorage, a pitiful end to a navy that should never have been built at all.

Great Britain was entirely hostile to taking sides in the quarrels of continental powers, except where necessary, as against Louis XIV and Napoleon, to prevent one country from dominating the whole continent. Britain tipped the balance of power against Spain in the 17th century, France in the 18th and early 19th centuries, and then Germany, and ultimately, as far as it could still influence it, against Russia in the second half of the 20th century. The original founder of France as Europe’s greatest power, Richelieu (prime minister 1624-1642) smashed Germany into hundreds of small principalities and

duchies, but knew to deter and not provoke British intervention on the continent. Bismarck, who founded the German Empire in 1871, also knew when to stop without rousing all Europe against him, under British subsidy and encouragement. He did not threaten Belgium, which the Great Powers had guaranteed, did not challenge the British at sea, and maintained the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia, that kept Russia out of the outreached and vengeful arms of France.

The headstrong, hyperactive German emperor, Wilhelm II, generally known to history as the Kaiser, touched all the bases in a home run of strategic disasters: he fired Bismarck and replaced him with ciphers; allowed the treaty with Russia to lapse, enabling the French to create an alliance with that power, just one long lifetime after Moscow was burned down while Napoleon slept in the Kremlin. Wilhelm launched a great naval construction program that alarmed and threatened the British and pushed them into alliance with the French and Russians, then gave the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the arthritic master of central Europe, the famous "blank cheque" that enabled Vienna to declare war on Serbia after the assassination of the heir to the Habsburg monarchy by a Slavic nationalist in 1914. This produced a cascade of hair-trigger declarations of war and the immense tragedy of the First World War. The Kaiser had one more, terminal, self-inflicted wound to inflict: unrestricted submarine war on neutral, and particularly American, shipping. This was as cataclysmic a blunder as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor 25 years later. The Americans entered the war just as the Russians, wracked by revolution, quit the war, and rejuvenated the exhausted French and British. If Germany had avoided provoking the United States, it could have got a draw.

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The Americans arrived in time to assist the French and British and Italians to victory. The Romanov, Habsburg, and Hohenzollern dynasties and the Turkish Sultanate collapsed, the first two after 300 and 700 years. The Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Empires were dissolved into nine different countries. Of these, almost a century later, Iraq, Syria, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia have disintegrated, though some of their constituent parts are flourishing. None of it need to have happened had not Kaiser Wilhelm challenged the supremacy of the British navy in a mad attempt to upstage his uncle and cousin, Britain's Edward VII and George V (Wilhelm's mother was Queen Victoria's daughter).

The closest modern equivalent, except for Pearl Harbor, was Stalin rushing into the Cold War with the West. He and his successors tried to foment revolution all over the world and imposed the hob-nailed jackboot of the Red Army on the neck of Eastern Europe, despite Stalin's commitment at Yalta to assure democratic rule in Eastern Europe. He united all the pre-war Great Powers (Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Japan) under American leadership against the U.S.S.R. The Soviet Union over-invested in military power and collapsed, and its forces, like the Kaiser's superfluous navy, were not seriously used (in deference to the unimaginable destructive power of hydrogen weapons).

Battleships had been the behemoth weapons in pre-atomic times, but apart from Jutland they only really exchanged fire five times in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, in the saga of the German battleship Bismarck in 1941, and in two successful U.S. actions against the Japanese in the Solomon Islands in 1942 and the Philippines in 1944. Although they were more than 35,000 tons and required years to build and they could not be hidden from espionage, all powers cheated on the Washington Naval Treaty limits, the first serious attempt at arms control, in 1922.

Lessons are that forces built to overawe incumbent powers are

rarely successful, unless the leading power is decrepit, as the late Roman Empire was; aggression that threatens a large aggregation of powers can usually be contained or defeated; negotiated arms limitations are unreliable, but much of military hardware is redundant; and appeasement of aggressors (such as Iran) has a bad history.

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