

Western front on 1914 strategies for the entente



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Christopher "Mike" White

"Once the fighting deadlocked on the Western Front by the end of 1914, what strategic courses of action should the countries of the Entente and Germany have adopted?"

Once the fighting deadlocked on the Western Front on 1914 the Entente, specifically the British should have opened a second front while the Germans should have conducted submarine warfare to draw the Grand Fleet into a favorable battle at a time and place of their choosing. Both actions are secondary operations and illustrate how the warnings of Clausewitz to open secondary operations only when they present exceptional rewards still hold true.

In the case of the British and the second front in the Dardanelles, the risk relative to the primary operation and achieving its strategic objective of providing relief for Russia and preventing it leaving the war was low. Additionally, it presented a direct way to attack the enemy's alliances as suggested by Sun Tzu.¹ Finally there was a distinct possibility of the Entente being able to draw undecided nations into the war on their side, nations who already had a reason to fight both the Ottomans and Austria Hungary.

In the case of the Germany, submarine warfare would have been a useful tool in the attrition of the British Grand Fleet given the Strategy used by the Admiralty for several reasons. First, submarine attrition of the Grand Fleet would create the conditions for a more favorable battle for the German High Seas Fleet preventing the blockade and subsequent starvation of the German population. Second, the Submarine was a great threat to the British

<https://assignbuster.com/western-front-on-1914-strategies-for-the-entente/>

Grand Fleet which was the centerpiece of British control of the seas. Finally, while the use of German submarines would have the effect of forcing the Grand Fleet into action favoring the Germans, it would not have the unwanted consequence of creating a potential enemy of the United States.

With the current stalemate, neither France nor Britain could afford to have Russia, whose forces currently tied down German troops in the east who otherwise would join the Western Front, leave the war. To break the stalemate and provide relief for their ally, Britain suggested the opening of a second front. In *On War*, Clausewitz states that secondary operations only be undertaken when they “ look exceptionally rewarding.”² . In this case, the plan was a landing in the Dardanelles, the narrow strait separating the Mediterranean from the Black Sea on which Constantinople is located. The immediate objective of the operation was to show support and commitment to the alliance with the added benefit of renewing the patriotic spirit of the Russian soldiers giving them greater scope in the fighting.³ Control of the straits would provide a much-needed link between Russia and her allies. This new link would allow Britain and France access to wheat while simultaneously providing a way to give Russia much needed weapons from the more industrially developed allies.

Both coastlines were littered with forts and artillery positions while the waters were lined with mines. The big guns of battleships would quickly neutralize the enemy cannons, and the armada would include minesweepers to clear the way. The battleships would confront Constantinople, shell it if

necessary and then accept the Ottoman surrender. A large fleet was raised consisting of 82 ships including 18 battleships both British and French.

The loss of control by the Ottomans would pose an existential threat to the Empire. The Entente control of the straits would threaten control of Constantinople which was the Capital of the Empire as well as its principal industrial center for the war effort. This threat would endanger the Ottoman forces from all sides and increase the value of any possible gains in the war and possibly drive them to peace reliving the Suez. ⁴ Any victory against the Ottoman Empire would give a boost to the morale at home increasing national resolve and the strength of the war effort.

A final reward from the campaign would be the possible influence of those powers in the region which had not yet entered the war. The taking of the straits and removal of the Ottoman Empire from the war would embolden those nations. Taking the Straits would also provide the opportunity for the campaign to draw in Greece, Bulgaria, Rumania, and Montenegro; who all had reasons to fight both the Ottoman and Austria-Hungary, into the war on the side of the Entente. The new allies would provide a boost both in troop and equipment strength as well as a boost in the morale of the civilian populations. With these nations in the Entente and access to the Black Sea there would be another potential avenue of attack on Austria-Hungary, another German Ally further attacking German alliances.

This combination of rewards from what should be a simple amphibious landing performed by the greatest Naval power of the age should produce a positive outcome. The Royal Navy in conjunction with the Royal Army and

aided by the French would quickly defeat the already beleaguered Ottoman forces swinging the pendulum of momentum in the war to favor the Entente resulting in a breaking of the stalemate on the Western Front.

When war broke out in 1914, the British Navy was the largest and most powerful in the world. The German High Seas Fleet, while formidable, stood little chance against it numerically.⁵ The German High Seas Fleet prepared for Der Tag, a decisive fleet on fleet engagement that would decide the fate of the High Seas Fleet and could Destroy the Grand Fleet eliminating British rule of the seas and effectively taking them out of the war. With the Grand Fleet blockade of the Northern Sea and the English Channel keeping the High Seas Fleet in port the only type of ship that could leave and perform any type of operation was the U-boat.

The U-boat threat had already caused the Admiralty to station the capital ships of the Grand Fleet far away from the German coast to ensure their safety. If the German commanders could go out and use their boats to attack the Grand Fleet at anchor or while unsuspecting at their posts far from the German homeland, then they could have eliminated many of the capital ships of the Grand Fleet.

The fear of such an attack was what drove the Admiralty to station the valuable dreadnoughts as far away as Loch Ewe, out of range of the enemy U-boats but creating an opportunity for the High Seas Fleet to disrupt the cross-channel line of communication had they been aware of it.⁶ This fear displayed by the Admiralty shows how the U-boats had already started to

direct the movements of the Grand Fleet even before they had caused any British ship casualties.

This ability to create openings, such as the opportunity of the cross-channel line of communication disruption, would have been vital to stopping the distant blockade of the German coast. The result of the blockade was a decrease in the average German citizens' diet to 1100 calories per day, resulting in a significant decline in the will of the people to continue the fight.

⁷ If we consider the strength of a nation as a product of force and will to fight, the blockade was a detractor which could have been mitigated but instead sizably reduced that strength.

It had already been proven in 1914 that the German U-boat threat to the Grand Fleet was a reality when the cruisers HMS Cressy, Hogue and Aboukir were all sunk by a single U-boat. ⁸ This prompted the Royal Navy to admit that the North Sea was not occupied by the Grand Fleet but by submarines and began to erode their willingness to accept the primacy of the capital ship championed by Mahan. The British Admiralty knew of the dangerous nature of the U-boat, as stated by Admiral Wilson submarines were "underhanded, unfair, and damned unEnglish!" ⁹

If German U-boats had been used offensively against the Grand Fleet, then the action of admiral Beatty and his battle-cruisers into Heligoland Bight to cover light forces which were under fire from a German force would have resulted in losses to the Grand Fleet vice the High Seas Fleet. The whole of the battle of Jutland could have been more even or, could have started with a German numerical advantage. In the end the idea was that even a fleet

<https://assignbuster.com/western-front-on-1914-strategies-for-the-entente/>

action could not force Britain to surrender because a win could not be attained by Germany but it would have been possible with proper submarine employment.

Finally, if Germany had gone with attacking military targets instead of merchant shipping then they would have had a much lower risk of bringing the United States into the war as an enemy. The United States was a major industrial power during WWI supplying the Entente and profiting from its trade. The United States had 1.2 million Tons of shipping on the high seas moving between its ports and those in Europe and Asia.¹⁰ While that is a lot of merchant traffic it was dwarfed by the British ability of 12.4 million tons. The United States did supply the Entente however the amount of shipping under US flag compared to English was small. If the Germans did not act against the neutral United States, the probability of them entering the war was small given their stated neutrality and desire to stay out of the war that was enveloping Europe and instead would have remained neutral.

It can be argued that while the Dardanelles was a great idea it was poorly executed. The poor execution had the opposite effect of what it should have had and therefore was the wrong course of action even given the possible positive rewards. The operation would fail because of lack of real strategic guidance, failure to clearly articulate what objectives were and how important they were and incomplete commitment of forces and resources to run a successful operation.

The War Council was seeking a quick, cheap victory. They expected a campaign of sharp gains with minimal resources, in fact, Churchill believed a

Navy-only operation would suffice to force the strait. ¹¹ The War Council had fallen into the trap of assuming away the risks based simply on the fact that the British were an Empire that was a Great Power and a racist feeling of superiority over the Turks who were no match. ¹² This overconfidence led to them placing the planning responsibilities upon the operational commander with no actual strategic guidance. There were mistakes at all levels of leadership from the War Council to tactical commanders with little or no experience and a lack of initiative ready to stop fighting at any inconvenience. The result of this lack of guidance was an incomplete commitment of forces and resources throughout the campaign.

Without clearly articulating what the objectives were the operational commanders were at a distinct disadvantage. The operational commander takes the strategic objective of the civilian leadership and turns that into his operational idea to be able to attain those objectives. Without clear objectives in this case they were unable to translate the unknown strategic objective into a plan that could be adapted for changes during the unfolding of the battle. As Clausewitz states “ The Strategist must therefore define an aim for the entire operational side of the war that will be in accordance with its purpose.” ¹³

Additionally, the incomplete commitment of resources and forces create another problem, not only was it impossible to come up with a coherent plan but it would also be impossible to adapt that plan due to lack of either resources or troops. Initially there was a stated need of 150, 000 troops to succeed in the operation, but due to the prevailing thought of Naval

bombardment being sufficient and the Western Front reduced the final number of troops to less than half that needed.¹⁴

The summation of lack of guidance, lack of commitment and lack of experienced leaders led inevitably to the failure of the operation and lack of realization of desired outcomes.

It can also be argued that the unrestricted submarine warfare was the only viable option for the German Navy to undertake to turn the tide of the war. Since 1914, the war was at a stalemate and not going well for Germany on the Western Front. The Battle of Jutland proved that the High Seas Fleet was not strong enough to defeat the Grand Fleet with the result that any attempt by the High Seas Fleet to attack British merchant traffic would not work as the Grand Fleet would prevent it. This brought about the thought that any attacks on Britain's shipping supply would have to be done by submarines. The desired effect would be to break the backbone of British energy and enterprise by depriving her of imported goods.¹⁵ The result was Germany deciding on a policy of wholesale unrestricted attack. Unrestricted submarine warfare would deprive Britain of needed supplies for industry and by extension break the will of France and Italy who were being kept afloat by the British and diminish the will of the people to fight by depriving them of necessities and if done swiftly would prevent the United States from entering the war on the side of the British.

By German estimation, there was an availability of 10.75 million tons of shipping available to Great Britain. The Grain harvest for the year had been bad world-wide and the supply ships to Britain would have to take longer

routes making them more susceptible to German attacks. A monthly destruction of 600, 000 tons of shipping would deprive Britain of needed grains forcing rationing and scare Denmark and Holland from trading and in total reducing British sea traffic by 40%. ¹⁶ The reduction of shipping and needed supplies would force rationing, reducing the will to fight and deprive industry of raw materials reducing the ability to fight while additionally reducing British exports to France and Italy.

If the campaign were announced and commenced rapidly, then there would be no time for negotiations between Britain and neutrals, scaring the neutrals and possibly keeping them out of the war. ¹⁷ The United States would again have to decide against neutrality, and even if they did decide against neutrality, their shipping capacity would have a small impact and take some time to increase to a level that would affect the war.

In the case of the Dardanelles, it is easy to look back with the benefit of hindsight and say that the Dardanelles were a poorly executed operation. However, with British Naval superiority supported by the French and a sizeable ground force, there is no reason that the campaign should have failed. The proper course of action was to open a second front and the Dardanelles were a good choice due to location being good for relieving the Russian allies, relieving the Suez, setting up a clear line to commence operations against Austria-Hungary, and most importantly bring in undecided nations in the area into the war on the side of the Entente increasing combat capability. Slight alterations to base strategy were needed but the importance of opening a second front to break the stalemate on the Western

Front was a necessity to end the war and lower the cost of victory to a more acceptable level.

In the Case of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare campaign, they would have been better off sticking to purely military targets to decrease Grand Fleet strength compared to High Seas Fleet strength. The submarine force was a danger to the British, and they acknowledged the fact by the stationing and distant blockade they chose to implement. Bringing British combat power to their level and selecting the place and time of engagement was the only way they would have been able to achieve victory. If they chose unrestricted submarine warfare, they would have had to have realistic estimates of the shipping capabilities of the British and of the damage that the submarines would be able to inflict on it. Most importantly, they would have to deal with the angry United States which had become the dominant industrial power and would be able to build and deploy ships almost as fast as the submarines could sink them effectively taking away any advantage that they would have achieved.

Both available choices were secondary operations or fronts, and secondary operations or fronts must have a definite and direct effect on the enemy. If the impact on the enemy is not direct and obvious, then it was a poor choice for the location or to even start the operation. While the ultimate objective is always victory, it does not mean that the result must be a direct combat success, only that the effect on the enemy has positive impact on your war aims. Secondary operations and fronts must be aimed as directly as possible at the enemy, or they will waste vital resources for little or no gain in the pursuit of the primary object, winning the war. For example, the Gallipoli

<https://assignbuster.com/western-front-on-1914-strategies-for-the-entente/>

campaign, in seeking a route to Russia for supply and relief would have been a direct effect on the Germany through the Ottoman Empire. In this case, the ‘whale’ of Britain, not having an army of sufficient size to meet the ‘elephant’ of Germany head-on, the result being a stalemate, sought a secondary theater where it could use its naval forces.

In Germany’s case, their choice of secondary operation increased risk by expanding the scope of the war and drawing in a new enemy. While the negative aspect and the possibility of bringing neutral parties into the war as enemies was evident to the German leadership, the reaction of the United States was poorly estimated by them. By itself their employment of the U-boat fleet didn’t impact the German military, making it a low risk but high reward to the war effort on the Western Front. Unfortunately, for the campaign to have the desired effect, US shipping had to be targeted as well which would dramatically increase overall risk. The lesson here is that you should analyze the risks of a secondary front or operation as the worst case, so you don’t put your primary objective in danger.

1 Sun Tzu. *The Art of War*. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1980), III 5.

2 Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*: Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton. Princeton University Press, (1976), 618.

3 Ibid., 186.

4 Kevin McCranie. *The War at Sea*. (presentation, Strategy and War Course, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 14 December 2016).

5 Paul M Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* . New York. Humanity Books, (1976), 242.

6 Ibid. 245

7 Kevin McCranie. *The War at Sea* .(presentation, Strategy and War Course, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 14 December 2016).

8 Paul M Kennedy. *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* . New York. Humanity Books, (1976), 245

.

9 Ibid. 248

1⁰ Kevin McCranie. *The War at Sea* .(presentation, Strategy and War Course, Naval War College, Newport, RI, 14 December 2016).), 147.

¹ Elliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. New York. Free Press, (1990), 134.

¹ ² Ibid. 134.

³ Carl von Clausewitz. *On War* : Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton. Princeton University Press, (1976), 177.

⁴ Elliot A. Cohen and John Gooch. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*. New York. Free Press, (1990), 136.

⁵ Admiral von Holtzendorf. *German History in Documents and Images* . Selected Readings. Naval War College, Newport, RI, (2016), 2.

<https://assignbuster.com/western-front-on-1914-strategies-for-the-entente/>

⁶ Ibid. 3.

⁷ Ibid. 4.