

## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— EARLY 20TH CENTURY —

# The Battle of Tannenberg

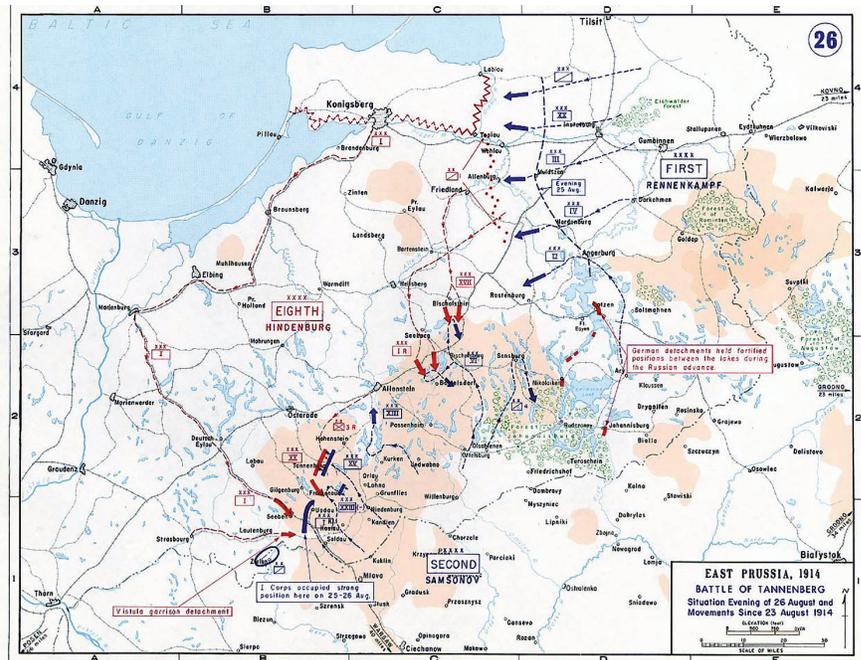
by Quil Kibak

The Battle of Tannenberg was fought from 26th to 30th of August, 1914, between the German and Russian Empires. World War I had begun a mere four weeks earlier, and Germany was relying on the Schlieffen Plan, devised a decade previously. According to the plan, in case of a two-front war, Germany would quickly mobilize, knock France out of the war, then wheel the German Army around and strike Russia before it could mobilize. The crucial assumption was that Russia would only be able to mobilize slowly. Thus, the vast majority of German forces were focused initially on France.

Russia's most likely area of attack, East Prussia, was defended by a delaying force, the 8th Army, in order to prevent too rapid an overrunning by Russia. Russian armies entered German territory on 17 August, only a month after the war broke out and earlier than the Germans expected, because Russia had begun to mobilize in secret, several days before the Tsar declared general mobilization.<sup>1</sup> The Russian plan was to utilize two armies – one arriving via railroad from Warsaw, the other from Vilnius – to catch the 8th Army in a pincer.<sup>2</sup> Though the Russians greatly outnumbered the

Germans, the defenders had several advantages: East Prussia was host to many marshes, lakes, and dense woods, which would slow any advance; Russian supply lines would be greatly elongated, and their trains were not usable inside Germany due to a difference in track gauge; and the fact that the Russians were sending their radio messages unencrypted.

As commander of the 8th Army General Max von Prittwitz's first inclination, upon realizing the scale of the invading Russian forces, was to retreat to the Vistula River. Upon relaying these plans to German High Command, Prittwitz was sacked and replaced with Generals Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff.<sup>3</sup> With new leadership came a radically different plan: the Russian 2nd Army, coming from Warsaw



under Gen. Alexander Samsonov, must be completely destroyed before the 1st Army, coming from Vilnius under Gen. Paul von Rennankampf, could be dealt with. As the Germans made their preparations, Samsonov's army continued to advance. Hindenburg and Ludendorff methodically weakened their center, extending their flanks until Samsonov's army, which had advanced to Allenstein (now Olsztyn, Poland) was completely surrounded.<sup>4</sup> By August 28, Samsonov

<sup>1</sup> [/academic\\_departments/history/WWI/WWOne26.jpg](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44573646).

<sup>2</sup> C.E. Perry, "The Battle of Tannenberg," *The Military Engineer*, Vol. 23, No. 131, September-October 1931, pp 405-08. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44573646>.

<sup>3</sup> "The Battle of Tannenberg, Situation Evening of 26 August 1914." Department of Military Art and Engineering, at the U.S. Military Academy. <https://westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics>

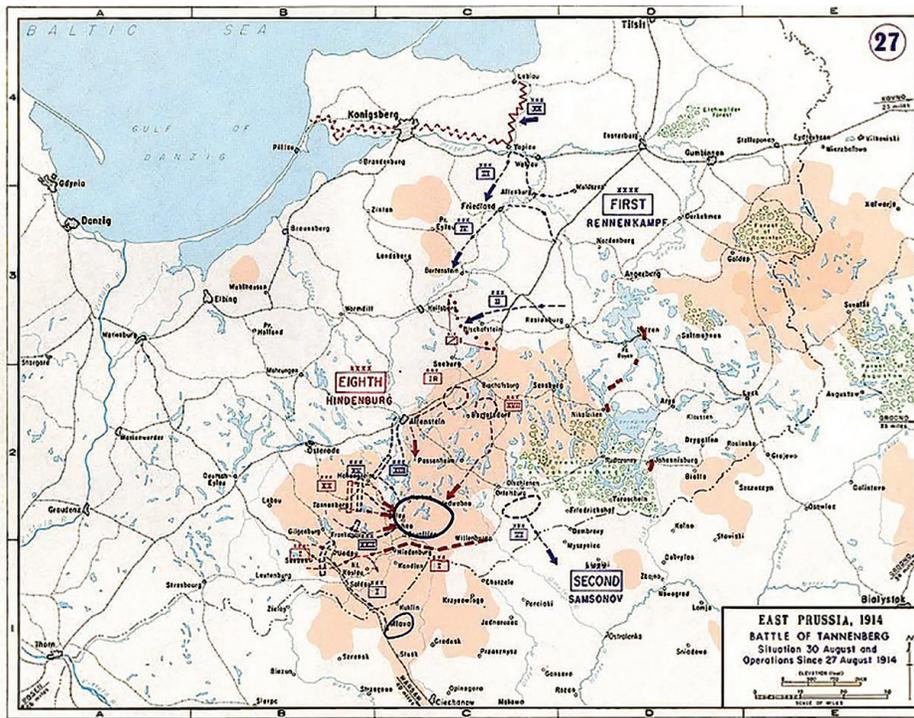
<sup>1</sup> L.C.F. Turner. "The Russian Mobilization of 1914," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, January 1968, pp 65-88. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/259967?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/259967?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).

<sup>2</sup> "The Battle of Tannenberg, Situation Evening of 26 August 1914." Department of Military Art and Engineering, at the U.S. Military Academy. <https://westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics>

realized the danger to his flanks and commenced a gradual withdrawal, but it was too late. During the next two days, his army was annihilated. Trapped in a great forested cauldron, the Russian 2nd Army was relentlessly pounded by artillery. By the end of the month, almost 100,000 Russian troops had been captured, with almost 80,000 killed or wounded.<sup>5</sup> Samsonov committed suicide rather than report the

gleaned from Manchuria was the “incredible carelessness of Russian communication methods.”<sup>7</sup> This ensured that instead of being skeptical of something that appeared too good to be true. Hoffmann understood that intercepted, unencrypted Russian orders were accurate depictions of Russian military plans and actions.

Why, then, were the Russians transmitting important orders without encryption? Throughout World War I, Russia consistently faced issues transitioning from one set of ciphers to the next. Officials poorly informed operators of policy, leading to circumstances in which old encryption methods were used weeks after new ciphers were distributed. This greatly helped code-breaking efforts by the Central Powers, who were able to “compare orders given in the old, already-broken code with messages transmitted in the new code.”<sup>8</sup> This continued at least to 1916. It should be noted that at the time, German interception methods were not extremely



loss of his army. The Germans required sixty trains to transport all the captured materiel back to Germany.

Multiple facets of intelligence were paramount to securing the German victory. Colonel Max Hoffmann, deputy Chief of Operations of the 8th Army, had observed the Russo-Japanese War as a Japanese guest. There, he learned that Rennenkampf and Samsonov “represented dueling factions within the upper levels of command.” Because of this rivalry Hoffman concluded Rennenkampf would hardly charge directly to Samsonov’s aid if the latter requested assistance.<sup>6</sup> While the primary reason his army was unable to help Samsonov’s was a dire lack of supplies, information such as this exposed the factionalism within the Russian army and contributed to the formation and execution of Germany’s daring plan. The other insight

robust and organized. Russian communicators displayed such disregard for any encryption whatsoever that the German command was able to quickly translate intercepted messages to usable intelligence. For example, on August 25th, an intercepted message conveyed “the mission of the Russian Second Army for that day” to Hindenburg.<sup>9</sup> After the battle, General Yuri Danilov, chief of operations at the Russian high command, Stavka,<sup>10</sup> declared that faults in the communication service had been the chief reason for the catastrophic outcome of the battle. The level of information that Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and the rest

/academic\_departments/history/WWI/WWOne27.pdf.  
 5. “Battle of Tannenberg (1914),” *New World Encyclopedia*, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle\\_of\\_Tannenberg\\_\(1914\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle_of_Tannenberg_(1914)).  
 6. “Battle of Tannenberg, World War I (1914),” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, retrieved June 14, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Tannenberg-World-War-I-1914>.

7. Ibid.  
 8. Alex Marshall. “Russian Military Intelligence, 1905-1917: The Untold Story behind Tsarist Russia in the First World War,” *War in History*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (November 2004), pp 393-423. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/26061986?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26061986?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents).  
 9. Wilhelm Flicke. “The Beginnings of Radio Intercept in World War I: A Brief History by a German Intelligence Officer,” National Security Agency. [https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/decclassified-documents/cryptologic-spectrum/beginnings\\_radio\\_intercept.pdf](https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/decclassified-documents/cryptologic-spectrum/beginnings_radio_intercept.pdf).  
 10. Ibid.

of the German command had access to as a result of intercepted radio transmissions was so significant that a later publication by the German Archives “strive[d] to save the face of the German Command by [commenting]: ‘But the critical decisions and orders for the battle, according to the unanimous statements of all participants, were made independently of the information which became known on the morning of 25 August through the radiograms.’”<sup>11</sup> It is impossible to overstate the depth of information so callously shared by Russian radio operators.

The Russians scrambled to invade East Prussia in order to take heat off the French, and in doing so faced many challenges that were inadequately planned for given the pace demanded. The difference in rail gauges affected supply efforts (and probably contributed to Samsonov’s center’s lack of supplies). The Russians had also planned to use existing telegraph lines in German territory, however, those were destroyed as the Germans retreated.<sup>12</sup> The Russian signal corps was both understaffed and undertrained, so the possibility of interception was deemed less important than the possibility that Russian radio receivers would be unable to decrypt encrypted communications. Lastly, the Germans set up efficient human intelligence networks and were aided by the local populace, for obvious reasons. “Young people on bicycles...hover[ed] around the [advancing Russian army] columns” and soldiers were disguised as civilians.<sup>13</sup>

Tannenberg was the first battle the outcome of which was decisively affected by the interception of enemy radio communications. The science of radiotelegraphy was still such a novelty that both sides were unsure how to gain information from such communications. The idea that previously-prepared plans could be changed on the fly by intercepting and decoding enemy orders was virtually unthinkable. It took the “personal initiative of the chief of the German fortress radio station at Thorn”<sup>14</sup> to plant the idea in the German High Command that such an intercept service would be worthwhile. Hindenburg named the battle after Tannenberg in order to “avenge” the battle of Grunwald in 1410, in which the Teutonic Knights were defeated by Polish-Lithuanian forces – Germans

defeated by Slavs.<sup>15</sup> Hindenburg had a personal reason, too – one of his ancestors fell at Grunwald.<sup>16</sup> However, it is possible that German commanders did not value intelligence as highly as it deserved. Ludendorff and Hindenburg were both praised by the press, but only Hoffmann remarked on the role that intelligence played in the victory, stating, “We had an ally that I can only talk about after it is over. We knew all the enemy’s plans.”<sup>17</sup>

A week later, Germany won another significant, if less decisive, victory at the Masurian Lakes, which expelled Rennenkampf’s 1st Army from German territory. Though these gains were not permanent, as a Russian counterattack regained much of the territory lost, the German’s success was only possible thanks to the utter annihilation of Samsonov’s 2nd Army, thanks to the decoded intelligence.

One aspect of the battle’s legacy remains contentious: Von Moltke, Chief of the German General Staff, sent three corps to the east on August 28th.<sup>18</sup> These forces arrived too late to have any impact at Tannenberg but have been raised as a reason why the Schlieffen Plan was a failure. However, even though Tannenberg was not that successful strategically, it was indubitably a significant tactical victory that illustrated the value of battlefield intelligence.

Quil Kibak is a political science student at Dickinson College and a research intern at the Institute of World Politics.

11. Ibid.

12. Jeffrey H. Norwitz. “Leveraging Operational Intelligence – The Battle of Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes (1914),” student paper, Naval War College, 2001. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a393520.pdf>.

13. Ibid.

14. Wilhelm Flicke. “The Beginnings of Radio Intercept in World War I: A Brief History by a German Intelligence Officer,” National Security Agency. [https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/cryptologic-spectrum/beginnings\\_radio\\_intercept.pdf](https://www.nsa.gov/Portals/70/documents/news-features/declassified-documents/cryptologic-spectrum/beginnings_radio_intercept.pdf).

15. “Battle of Tannenberg (1914),” *New World Encyclopedia*, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle\\_of\\_Tannenberg\\_\(1914\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle_of_Tannenberg_(1914)).

16. Ibid.

17. Max von Hoffmann. *War Diaries and Other Papers*. Vol. I, London: Martin Secker, 1929.

18. “Battle of Tannenberg (1914),” *New World Encyclopedia*, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle\\_of\\_Tannenberg\\_\(1914\)](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle_of_Tannenberg_(1914)).