

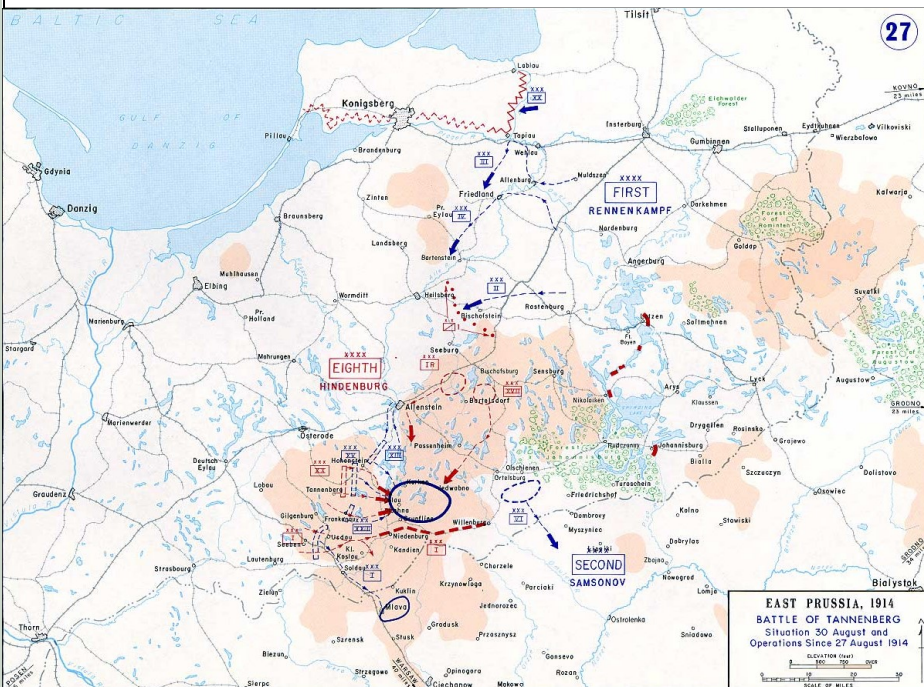


The ASC History Newsletter

This
MONTH in
military
history ...

- 1607: Jamestown Colony founded
- 1689: King William's War began
- 1756: French and Indian War began
- 1775: Fort Ticonderoga captured by Americans
- 1812: The Ordnance Dept. was established by act of Congress
- 1848: Mexico ratified the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
- 1863: General Grant surrounded Vicksburg
- 1915: Lusitania sunk
- 1917: General Pershing appointed commander of the American Expeditionary Force
- 1943: The Memphis Belle completed 25 missions over Europe
- 1954: French defeated at Dien Bien Phu
- 1960: U-2 spy plane shot down over the Soviet Union
- 1988: Soviet Troops began withdrawal from Afghanistan
- 2011: Osama bin Laden killed by Seal Team Six in Pakistan

100th Anniversary of World War I: Battle of Tannenberg



The Battle of Tannenberg was the first major World War I battle between the German Army and the Russian Army. Fought between August 26-31, 1914, the Battle of Tannenberg was a major tactical victory for the Germans but arguably had greater mythic significance than military importance.

With the possibility of a two front war with France and Russia, German war plans called for a holding operation against Russia by minimum forces concentrated in the vulnerable province of East Prussia, until victory over France would allow the transfer of large forces to the eastern theater.

Russia's war plan against Germany involved sending two armies against the East Prussia salient. The first would advance west across the Niemen River, and the second would move northwest from Russian Poland.

Problems arose with implementation of the Russian plan because of the hostility between the two Russian army commanders, inadequate communications, poor staff work and restrictive geographic barriers. Nevertheless, the Russian plan of using their significantly superior numbers to envelop the German Eighth Army had good prospects of success.

The Russian First Army had 9 divisions, and the Second Army had 10 divisions; all of which were first-line formations. The Germans had altogether 9 divisions, and 3 of them were reservists. Even if the German Eighth Army managed to concentrate its full strength against one of its opponents, even odds were a poor predictor of victory in any attack.

Apart from the political consequences of abandoning the entire province of East Prussia, the German high command considered it vital to maintain a presence east of the Vistula River as a springboard for the eventual full-scale counter-attack against Russia. To ensure this, two corps were withdrawn from Belgium

and sent eastward as reinforcements. Additionally, German field commanders were replaced with Colonel General Paul von Hindenburg, who had returned to active service from retirement and who had a reputation for being level-headed, and Major General Erich Ludendorff, a brilliant but abrasive and high strung General Staff officer.

As this new leadership team traveled east to the front, they were not only developing the plans for the defense of East Prussia, but also an eventual offensive operation. The defense of East Prussia had for years been the subject of staff rides and maneuvers. In almost every hypothetical situation where the Russian army attacked from multiple directions, striking one of their armies before they could unite was a favored solution for the German leadership. The Russian did their best to oblige.

The Germans took advantage of the well-developed East Prussian rail network and the march discipline of their infantry to concentrate virtually undisturbed against the Russian Second Army marching from Russian Poland to the southeast. On August

26 after several days of hard marching, the German XVII Corps and the I Reserve Corps attacked the right flank of the Russian Second Army. The defeat was so thorough that the Russian commander would need 8 hours just to tell his superiors of the defeat. The next day, the Germans caved in the Russian left flank. Presented with the possibility of a double envelopment, the Russian commander should have immediately called for a retreat. Instead, he continued the advance. When the retreat was finally called, most of the Russian Second Army had virtually no escape.

By any name, Tannenberg seemed victory enough: 50,000 Russians dead or wounded, another 90,000 prisoners, and the equipment of an entire army captured, including 500 guns. German losses were fewer than 15,000. Though the German reinforcements from Belgium arrived too late to share the glory, they played a critical role in the subsequent battle at the Masurian Lakes, which sent the Russian 1st Army reeling back over the border by September 14. In the second battle the Russian commander called retreat before the Germans could encircle and annihilate his formation.

Five centuries earlier a Polish/Lithuanian army had smashed the forces of the Teutonic Knights at Tannenberg, in a battle symbolizing the end of Germany's eastward expansion. Now that ancient defeat was eradicated by a modern victory.

Tannenberg became an instant myth in a Germany hungry for victories, and it set Hindenburg and Ludendorff on a road to supreme power in the Second Empire. The German Army's pre-war organization and training had proven themselves, bolstering German morale while at the same time severely shaking Russian confidence.

