

Tannenberg—Drama of the World War

Big German Victory of 1914

By JOHN A. MENAUGH

IN THE supreme headquarters of the German army at Coblenz on Aug. 21, 1914, a telephone rang sharply and insistently.

A faint and shaky voice on the far end of the wire asked for Field Marshal Moltke, chief of the general staff. The voice speaking from the distance was that of General Prittwitz, commander of the German 8th army in East Prussia. Prittwitz had cleared the line from Wartenburg, his headquarters, to tell his chief that the German army in East Prussia had been roughly handled the day before at Gumbinnen by a superior Russian force under General Rennenkampf. He told Moltke that because of the heavy odds he intended to withdraw his army to the line of the Vistula river, possibly even farther.

"But you must hold the Vistula at all costs," shouted Moltke.

That this could not be guaranteed Prittwitz explained, pointing out that the river was low and fordable in many places and that his army was only a mere handful as compared with the Russian forces.

Then and there Prittwitz sealed his doom as a military leader. Moltke at once began looking around for his successor.

The next day a retired and aging general residing in Hanover received a telegram from the kaiser asking if he were prepared for immediate service.

"I am ready," Hindenburg wired in reply.

Under these circumstances was resurrected for the emergency and thrown into the war on the front facing Russia the famous military genius, Paul von Hindenburg, whose appearance in East Prussia, a country that he knew by heart, marked the turning of the tide against the Russians.

Long before the beginning of World war the Russians and the



(Associated Press photo.)
Hindenburg, left, and Ludendorff.

French had worked out a plan of cooperation. Knowing that the Germans in the event of hostilities would move quickly against France, the military men of Paris and St. Petersburg conceived a program that would split the German forces. Russia's part of the program called for an immediate penetration of East Prussia to lighten the pressure on the French front.

And so when war came Russia was ready to play its part, a tragic rôle indeed, as was shown when the final curtain was rung down on the East Prussian campaign of 1914. But for the battling Russians 800 miles away the first battle of the Marne might not have been an Allied victory.

Russian plans for a quick advance into East Prussia involved considerable movement through that part of Russia which now is Poland. The territory in East Prussia in which fighting subsequently occurred is about the same in its general terrain as Poland. The military problems of 1914 in East Prussia and Poland were about the same as those of armies operating in Poland today. The theater of war in the campaign under discussion was a land of undulating plains between the Vistula and the Niemen rivers. It presented no difficulties to maneuvering such as later were encountered by the Russians in the Carpathian mountains, far to the south, although as a natural defense line for the Germans in East Prussia were the Masurian

lakes, a series of irregular bodies of water extending from north to south about fifty miles.

Two great Russian armies were to be pushed into East Prussia as soon as possible after the declaration of war, the 1st army, under Rennenkampf, from a line along the Niemen river; the 2d army, under General Samsonov, from a line along the Narew river.

Rennenkampf and Samsonov were supposed to be the pick of the Russian service, but unfortunately they were bitter personal enemies. Their immediate superior was General Jilinski, chief of the general staff and commander of the northwestern front.

The 1st army under Rennenkampf poured across the frontier from Russia on Aug. 17 and 18. Composed of six and a half divisions of infantry and artillery and five divisions of cavalry, it was an imposing fighting force. Aiming toward the territory north of the chain of the Masurian lakes, its plan was to advance to the so-called Interburg gap, a forty-three-mile section of open country down which ran the Interburg-Allenstein railway, to draw the Germans as far east as possible. The object of luring the enemy to the east was to lay it open to attack in the rear by the 2d army under Samsonov, which was to advance at some distance south of the lakes to the line between Rastenburg and Allenstein.

To oppose the two great Russian armies, each of which was larger than itself, was the German 8th army under the aforementioned Prittwitz. The German plan was to throw this army at whichever Russian army appeared in East Prussia first, crush it if possible, and then, by employing the splendidly organized railway system of this region, to shift quickly and strike the other Russian army.

Prittwitz, however, did not carry out the plan to the fullest. He dispatched his 20th corps under Scholtz to the southeast to await the arrival of Samsonov's army and hold it. His 1st corps, under François, he ordered forward to delay Rennenkampf. And his 17th corps, under Mackensen, and his 1st reserve corps, under Von Bülow, he held in reserve.

François insisted upon strik-



Climax of battle of Tannenberg. The situation on Aug. 29, showing Samsonov's center (13th and 15th corps) encircled and rest of Russian army dissipated. Large black figures indicate German corps, smaller black figures their divisions. Outline figures indicate Russian corps.

ing Rennenkampf with the full force of the German army. Prittwitz was reluctant to alter his plan. François continued to insist. Finally Prittwitz weakened, allowing the reserves to advance and join the 1st corps.

Following an indecisive action at Stullupen on Aug. 17, the Germans on Aug. 20 met the Russians on a line just east of Gumbinnen, directly east of Königsberg and north of the lakes. Seven German divisions were opposed to eight of the Russians. The difference in the strength of the two armies was greater, however, than the numbers of divisions would indicate, since a Russian division contained sixteen battalions, as against only twelve for a German

division. The Germans were superior in artillery. François' corps surprised the Russians on their right at dawn, driving them back seven miles. Bülow's 1st reserve corps made progress on the enemy's left, but Mackensen's corps in the center was badly whipped.

Rennenkampf claimed this battle at Gumbinnen as a victory, on the strength of the whipping administered to the German center. He had inflicted heavy losses on Mackensen's troops. He had held the field after his wings finally had refused to budge farther, and he had seen the Germans retire.

Prittwitz, nicknamed the fat soldier, was not of the stuff required for this warfare on a co-

lossal scale. While his officers urged him to renew the attack on Rennenkampf, even without recalling the 20th corps, he took it upon himself to telephone to Moltke, and was replaced by Hindenburg. As chief of staff of the eastern army under Hindenburg, German military headquarters chose Major General Ludendorff, famous for his resourcefulness and his heroism at the taking of Liège. Hindenburg and Ludendorff met at Hanover and together journeyed eastward by rail, arriving at Marienburg, where Hindenburg on Aug. 23 took over command of the 8th army.

In the meantime hourly reports had been arriving at the German supreme headquarters from the western front to the effect that all was going well with the advance against the French. It was decided to detach six corps from the armies in the west and send them to East Prussia to help stop the Russians. Two corps, the 11th and the guard reserve, could be sent at once, but the other four, being engaged, could not be spared until later. Actually only the two that were immediately available were sent.

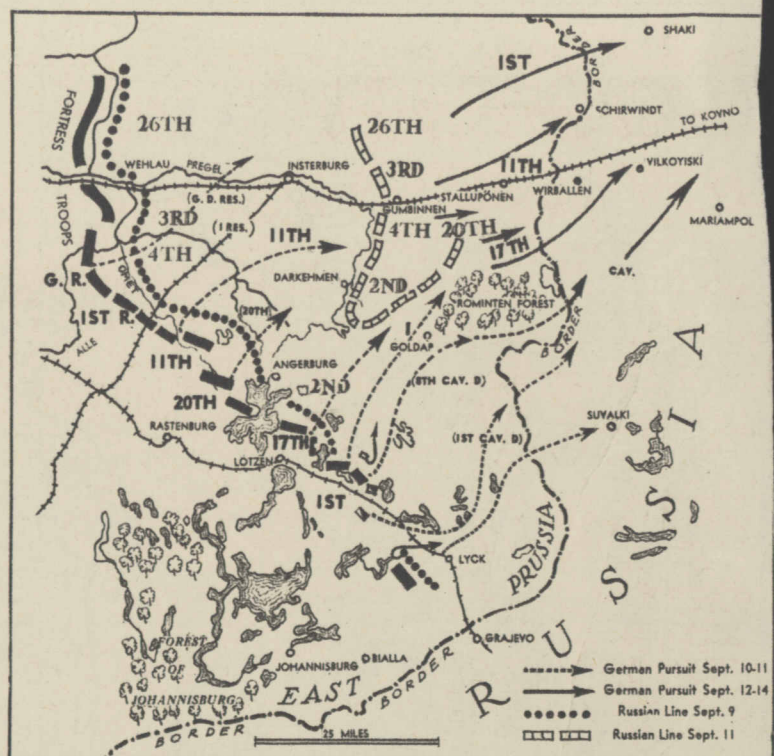
"Thus," according to the Rt. Hon. Winston S. Churchill, an authoritative chronicler of the war and today once more first lord of the British admiralty, "the wheeling wing of the Schlieffen plan was weakened at its most critical moment by the withdrawal of the two corps, which otherwise in a fortnight would have filled the fatal gap at the Marne."

While they were withdrawn from the western front during the pivotal advance into France which had been worked out years before by Count von Schlieffen, and thus took no part in the first battle of the Marne, the two corps in question arrived in East Prussia too late to have a part in the next battle fought there—where at one of the most crucial periods of the war.

On Aug. 21 and 22, three days behind Rennenkampf, who still was holding his position near Gumbinnen, Samsonov with his five army corps (more than 200,000 men) crossed the frontier of East Prussia. The Russian 2d army, after marching nine days through a desolate region (purposely left desolated by the Russians as a defense against German invasion), streamed into German territory on a wide front, hungry, worn, and foot-sore. Most of its supplies had been left far in the rear.

Jilinski all the while was urging Samsonov to hurry. It was the Russian plan, it is well to recall here, for Samsonov's army to swing up from the southeast and west of the Masurian lakes to cut in behind the German army as it faced Rennenkampf. The Russian 2d army was well across the frontier when Hindenburg arrived at Marienburg on the 23d and took command of the Germans. Samsonov's right was near Ortelsburg, while his left was between Neidenburg and Dzialdowo (Soldau). The German 20th corps was just north of Neidenburg.

The German army that had opposed Rennenkampf on the 20th had vanished from before his front the following day. The 17th corps and the 1st reserve corps already were fifteen miles



The first battle of the Masurian lakes, showing movements of two armies from Sept. 9 to 14. Solid black figures are German corps, outline figures Russian corps.

away, moving in a southerly direction. The 1st corps was entraining twenty miles away from Königsberg. Rennenkampf did nothing. In fact, he did nothing until Aug. 23, when he got his troops in motion and slowly moved westward along the Baltic shore. There is an explanation for the inactivity of Rennenkampf during those three days. Jilinski did not want him to advance too hurriedly and drive the Germans too far west. He wanted Rennenkampf to wait until Samsonov would have time to come up and attack the enemy in the rear.

But Rennenkampf, while he was waiting for this master stroke to be carried out, apparently lost all contact with the Germans. Through the aid of his five divisions of cavalry, 20,000 men, he could have kept himself informed as to the movements of the enemy. The Russian scouting both on land and

already had crossed his own front on their retirement to the Vistula and that he had been too late to cut them off.

As he moved forward he actually, without knowing it, was widening the distance between Rennenkampf and himself. His army was in sore straits, his supply system was broken down and he was ill prepared for battle. To make matters worse, he was sending out orders to his corps commanders by wireless—orders that were picked up and easily decoded by the enemy.

The new German command had injected life into the army that had been so poorly directed by Prittwitz. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, both of the fighting type, were preparing to launch a death-dealing blow at Samsonov. Fortunately for them, their plan had been well worked out before their arrival on the scene



Tannenberg as it appeared after the Russians had left.

in the air was pitiful. There virtually were no Russian planes to spy on the enemy, and the cavalry activities were poor even for Russia.

On the same day—Aug. 23—that Rennenkampf started his leisurely march toward the west, Samsonov's center, composed of the 13th, 15th, and 23d corps, moving toward the northwest, contacted the German 20th corps, which had been reinforced by a landwehr division and a fortress detachment. The German 1st corps, which had been sent by rail around by Königsberg, had not yet come up, nor had the other two German corps that had fought at Gumbinnen.

The engagement between the Russian center and the German 20th corps was hard fought. Slowly the Germans recoiled before the attack, pivoting back until they presented a curving line just east of the town of Tannenberg.

On the 24th and 25th, as Samsonov was hammering the Germans before him, Rennenkampf was reporting that the enemy was in retreat ahead of his army. Jilinski was urging Samsonov to hurry.

On the morning of the 26th Samsonov's army was disposed as follows: His center of two corps, the 13th and 15th, was advancing northwesterly and was close to a line between Allenstein and Hohenstein. On his right was one corps, the 6th, and the 4th cavalry division, at Rothfels, two days' march from the center. On his left was the 1st corps and the 6th and 15th cavalry divisions, near Koschlaw, one day's march from the center. The 23d corps at the time was moving into the gap between the center and the left. Samsonov believed at this stage of his advance that the Germans flying in front of Rennenkampf

Col. Max Hoffmann, general staff officer of the 8th army, already had carried out many steps facilitating the concentration desired by the two generals.

In order to fall upon the Russian 2d army with the greatest force available for the purpose the German command had been bringing its troops down from the north by forced marches. Only a thin screen of cavalry had been left in front of Rennenkampf's army.

On the morning of Aug. 26 both flanks of Samsonov's army were attacked. François with his 1st corps struck at the Russian left, but, being without most of his artillery, which had not yet arrived, he contented himself with driving in some of the Russian outposts. The next day he launched his attack in earnest. At daybreak a heavy artillery bombardment of the Russian 1st corps at Uzdowo created considerable consternation, finally throwing the Russians into a panic. By 10 o'clock that morning the Russian left had vanished—it had been completely routed.

The rear of Samsonov's center now was exposed, and François marched toward Neidenburg. He found no opposition there, and by the night of the 28th his van had reached Muschaken, eight miles east of Neidenburg. By the night of the 29th the entire road from Neidenburg to Willenberg was in German hands. The next day the Russians, coming from Malva, attacked and retook Neidenburg. But on the 31st the Germans again captured the town.

The attack on the Russian right wing on the morning of Aug. 26 was made by the German 17th and the 1st reserve corps, which had been pulled away hurriedly from their position. (Continued on page eight.)



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