

A Summary of the Battle of Tannenberg

by General Paul von Hindenburg

General Paul von Hindenburg was the German General who replaced General Maximilian von Prittwitz, after Prittwitz ordered a hurried retreat from Russian forces at Tannenberg after encountering Russian forces. Hindenburg made the encounter into a significant victory for Germany. The following is his report of the battle.

In the pocket-book of a dead Russian officer a note had been found which revealed the intention of the enemy Command.

It told us that Rennenkampf's Army was to pass the Masurian Lakes on the north and advance against the Insterburg-Angerburg line. It was to attack the German forces presumed to be behind the Angerapp while the Narew Army was to cross the Lotzen-Ortelsburg line to take the Germans in flank.

The Russians were thus planning a concentric attack against the Eighth Army, but Samsonof's Army now already extended farther west than was originally intended.

What, indeed, could we do to meet this dangerous enemy scheme? It was dangerous less on account of the audacity of the conception than by reason of the strength in which it was to be carried out - at any rate, strength from the point of view of numbers.

We could hope that it would be otherwise as regards strength of will. During the months of August and September Russia brought up no fewer than 800,000 men and 1,700 guns against East Prussia, for the defence of which we had only 210,000 German soldiers and 600 guns at our disposal. Our counter-measures were simple. I will attempt to make the broad outlines of our plan clear to the reader even if he is not an expert.

In the first place we opposed a thin centre to Samsonof's solid mass. I say thin, not weak. For it was composed of men with hearts and wills of steel. Behind them were their homes, wives and children, parents and relatives and everything they had. It was the 10th Corps, brave East and West Prussians.

This thin centre might bend under the enemy's pressure, but it would not break. While this centre was engaged two important groups on its wings were to carry out the decisive attack.

The troops of the 1st Corps, reinforced by Landwehr - likewise sons of the threatened region - were brought for the battle from the right, the northwest, the troops of the 17th Corps and the 1st Reserve Corps, with a Landwehr brigade, from the left, the north and northeast. These men of the 17th Corps and 1st Reserve Corps as well as the Landwehr and Landsturm also had behind them everything which made life worth living.

We had not merely to win a victory over Samsonof. We had to annihilate him. Only thus could we get a free hand to deal with the second enemy, Rennenkampf, who was even then plundering and burning East Prussia. Only thus could we really and completely free our old Prussian land and be in a position to do something else which was expected of us - intervene in the mighty battle for a decision which was raging between Russia and our Austro-Hungarian Ally in Galicia and Poland.

If this first blow were not final the danger for our Homeland would become like a lingering disease, the burnings and murders in East Prussia would remain unavenged, and our Allies in the south would wait for us in vain.

It was thus a case for complete measures. Everything must be thrown in which could prove of the slightest use in manoeuvre warfare and could at all be spared. The fortresses of Graudenz and Thorn disgorged yet more Landwehr fit for the field.

Moreover, our Landwehr came from the trenches between the Masurian Lakes, which were covering our new operations in the east, and handed over the defence there to a smaller and diminishing number of Landsturm. Once we had won the battle in the field we should no longer need the fortresses of Thorn and Graudenz, and should be freed from anxieties as regards the defiles between the lakes.

Our cavalry division and the Konigsberg garrison with two Landwehr brigades were to remain facing Rennenkampf, who might fall upon us like an avalanche from the north-east at any time. But at the moment we could not yet say whether these forces would really be sufficient.

They formed but a light veil which would easily be torn if Rennenkampf's main columns moved or his innumerable cavalry squadrons advanced, as we had to fear. But perhaps they would not move. In that case the veil would be enough to cover our weakness.

We had to take risks on our flanks and rear if we were to be strong at the decisive point. We hoped we might succeed in deceiving Rennenkampf. Perhaps he would deceive himself. The strong fortress of Konigsberg with its garrison and our cavalry might assume the proportions of a mighty force in the imagination of the enemy.

But even supposing Rennenkampf cradled himself in illusions to our advantage, would not his High Command urge him forward in forced marches to the south-west-in our rear? Would not Samsonof's cry for help bring him in hot haste to the battlefield? And even if the sound of human voices echoed in vain, would not the warning thunder of the battle reach the Russian lines north of the Lakes, nay, to the enemy's Headquarters itself?

Caution with regard to Rennenkampf was therefore necessary, though we could not carry it to the extent of leaving strong forces behind, or we should find ourselves weaker on the battlefield than we ought to be.

When we considered the numbers on both sides a comparison with the probable Russian forces showed a great disparity against us, even if we counted in on our side the two Landwehr brigades which were then coming from Schleswig-Holstein, where they had been employed in coast protection (and assuming that they would arrive in time for the battle), and even if Rennenkampf did not move and indeed played no part.

Moreover, it must be remembered that large bodies of Landwehr and Landsturm had to fight in the first line. Older classes against the pick of Russia's youth! We had the further disadvantage that most of our troops and, as the situation decreed, all those which had to deliver the *coup de grace*, had just been engaged in heavy and expensive fighting.

Had they not just been compelled to leave the battlefield of Gumbinnen to the Russians? The troops were not therefore marching with the proud feeling of being victors. Yet they pressed forward

to the battle with stout hearts and unshaken confidence. We were told that their moral was good, and it therefore justified bold decisions.

Where it was somewhat shaken such decisions could not fail to restore it. It had been thus before; could it be otherwise now? I had no misgivings on the score of our numerical inferiority. He who reckons solely by the visible in-war is reckoning falsely. The inherent worth of the soldier is everything. It was on that that I based my confidence.

What I thought to myself was this:

The Russian may invade our Fatherland, and contact with the soil of Germany may lift up his heart, but that does not make him a German soldier, and those who lead him are not German officers.

The Russian soldier had fought with the greatest obedience on the battlefields of Manchuria although he had no sympathy with the political ambitions of his rulers in the Pacific.

It did not seem unlikely that in a war against the Central Powers the Russian Army would have greater enthusiasm for the war aims of the Tsar's Empire. On the other hand, I considered that, taking it all round, the Russian soldier and officer would not display higher military qualities in the European theatre than they had in the Asiatic, and believed that I was entitled to credit our side with a plus on the ground of intrinsic value instead of a minus for our numerical inferiority.

Such was our plan and such our line of reasoning before and for the battle. We compressed these ideas and intentions into a short report which we sent from Marienburg to Main Headquarters on August 23: "Concentration of the army for an enveloping attack in the region of the 10th Corps planned for August 26."

On the evening of the 23rd I took a short walk on the western bank of the Nogat. From there the red walls of the proud castle of the Teutonic Knights, the greatest brick monument of Baltic Gothic, made a truly wonderful picture in the evening light. Thoughts of a noble chivalry of the past mingled involuntarily with conjecture as to the veiled future.

The sight of the refugees flying past me from my home province deepened the sense of responsibility that possessed me. It was a melancholy reminder that war not only affects the fighting man, but proves a thousandfold scourge to humanity by the destruction of the very essentials of existence.

On August 24 I motored with my small Staff to the Headquarters of the 10th Corps, and thus entered the village which was to give its name to the battle so soon to blaze up.

Tannenberg! A word pregnant with painful recollections for German chivalry, a Slav cry of triumph, a name that is fresh in our memories after more than five hundred years of history.

Before this day I had never seen the battlefield which proved so fateful to German culture in the East. A simple monument there bore silent witness to the deeds and deaths of heroes. On one of the following days we stood near this monument while Samsonov's Russian Army was going to its doom of sheer annihilation.

On our way from Marienburg to Tannenberg the impression of the miseries into which war had plunged the unhappy inhabitants were intensified. Masses of helpless refugees, carrying their

belongings, pressed past me on the road and to a certain extent hindered the movements of our troops which were hastening to meet the foe.

Among the Staff at the Corps Headquarters I found the confidence and resolution which were essential for the success of our plan. Moreover, they had a favourable opinion of the moral of the troops at this spot, which was at first the crucial point for us.

The day brought us no decisive information either about Rennenkampf's operations or Samsonof's movements. Apparently it only confirmed the fact that Rennenkampf was moving forward very slowly. We could not see the reason for this.

Of the Narew Army, we knew that its main columns were pressing forward against the 10th Corps. Under its pressure this corps refused its left wing. There was nothing doubtful about this measure. Quite the contrary. The enemy, following up, would all the more effectively expose his right flank to our left enveloping column which was marching on Bischofsburg.

On the other hand the hostile movement which was apparently in progress against our western wing and Lautenburg attracted our attention, as it caused us some anxiety. We had the impression that the Russians were thinking of enveloping us in turn at this point and coming in on our flank.

August 25 gave us a rather clearer picture of Rennenkampf's movements. His columns were marching from the Angerapp, and therefore on Konigsberg. Had the original Russian plan been abandoned? Or had the Russian leaders been deceived by our movements and suspected that our main force was in and around the fortress?

In any case we must now have not the slightest hesitation in leaving but a thin screen against Rennenkampf's mighty force. On this day Samsonof, obviously feeling his way, was directing his main columns towards our 20th Corps. The corps on the Russian right wing was undoubtedly marching on Bischofsburg, and therefore towards our 17th Corps and 1st Reserve Corps, which had reached the district north of this village on this day.

Apparently further large Russian forces were concentrating at Mlawa.

This day marked the conclusion of the stage of expectation and preparation. We brought our 1st Corps round to the right wing of the 20th Corps. The general attack could begin.

August 26th was the first day of the murderous combat which raged from Lautenburg to north of Bischofsburg. The drama on which the curtain was rising, and whose stage stretched for more than sixty miles, began not with a continuous battle line but in detached groups; not in one self-contained act, but in a series of scenes.

General von Francois was leading his brave East Prussians on the right swing. They pushed forward against Usdau with a view to storming the key to this part of the southern battle front next day.

General von Scholtz's magnificent corps gradually shook off the chains of defence and addressed themselves to the business of attack. Fierce was the fighting round Bischofsburg that this day witnessed.

By the evening magnificent work had been done on our side at this point. In a series of powerful blows the wing corps of Samsonof's right had been defeated and forced to retreat on Ortelsburg by the troops of Mackensen and Below (10th Corps and 1st Reserve Corps), as well as Landwehr.

But we could not yet realize how far-reaching our victory had been. The Staff expected to have to meet a renewed and stout resistance south of this day's battlefield on the following day. Yet was their confidence high.

It was now apparent that danger was threatening from the side of Rennenkampf. It was reported that one of his corps was on the march through Angerburg. Would it not find its way to the rear of our left enveloping force?

Moreover, disquieting news came to us from the flank and rear of our western wing. Strong forces of Russian cavalry were in movement away there in the south. We could not find out whether they were being followed up by infantry. The crisis of the battle now approached.

One question forced itself upon us. How would the situation develop if these mighty movements and the enemy's superiority in numbers delayed the decision for days? Is it surprising that misgivings filled many a heart, that firm resolution began to yield to vacillation, and that doubts crept in where a clear vision had hitherto prevailed?

Would it not be wiser to strengthen our line facing Rennenkampf again and be content with half-measures against Samsonof? Was it not better to abandon the idea of destroying the Narew Army in order to ensure ourselves against destruction?

We overcame the inward crisis, adhered to our original intention, and turned in full strength to effect its realization by attack. So the order was issued for our right wing to advance straight on Neidenburg, and the left enveloping wing "to take up its position at 4. a.m. and intervene with the greatest energy."

August 27 showed that the victory of the 1st Reserve Corps and 17th Corps at Bischofsburg on the previous day had had far-reaching results. The enemy had not only retired, but was actually fleeing from the battlefield.

Moreover, we learned that it was only in the imagination of an airman that Rennenkampf was marching in our rear. The cold truth was that he was slowly pressing on to Konigsberg. Did he, or would he, not see that Samsonof's right flank was already threatened with utter ruin and that the danger to his left wing also was increasing from hour to hour?

For it was on this day that Francois and Scholtz stormed the enemy's lines at and north of Usdau and defeated our southern opponent. Now, when the enemy's centre pushed forward farther towards Allenstein-Hohenstein, it was no longer victory but destruction that lured it on.

For us the situation was clear. On the evening of this day we gave orders for the complete encirclement of the enemy's central mass, his 13th and 15th Corps.

The bloody struggle continued to rage on August 28.

On the 29th a large part of the Russian Army saw itself faced with total annihilation at Hohenstein. Ortelsburg was reached from the north, Willenberg, through Neidenburg, from the west. The ring round thousands and thousands of Russians began to close. Even in this desperate situation there was plenty of Russian heroism in the cause of the Tsar, heroism which saved the honour of arms but could not longer save the battle.

Meanwhile Rennenkampf was continuing to march quietly on Konigsberg. Samsonof was lost at the very moment when his comrade was to give proof of other and better military qualities.

For we were already in a position to draw troops from the battle front to cover the work of destruction in which we were engaged in the great cauldron, Neidenburg-Willenberg-Passenheim, and in which Samsonof sought for death in his despair. Swelling columns of prisoners poured out of this cauldron.

These were the growing proofs of the greatness of our victory. By a freak of fortune it was in Osterode, one of the villages which we made our Headquarters during the battle, that I received one of the two captured Russian Corps Commanders, in the same inn at which I had been quartered during a General Staff ride in 1881 when I was a young Staff officer. The other reported to me next day at a school which we had converted into an office.

As the battle proceeded we were able to observe what splendid raw material, generally speaking, the Tsar had at his disposal. I had the impression that it doubtless contained many qualities worth training. As in 1866 and 1870, I noticed on this occasion how quickly the German officer and soldier, with their fine feeling and professional tact, forgot the former foe in the helpless captive.

The lust of battle in our men quickly ebbed away and changed to deep sympathy and human feeling. It was only against the Cossacks that our men could not contain their rage. They were considered the authors of all the bestial brutalities under which the people and country of East Prussia had suffered so cruelly.

The Cossack apparently suffered from a bad conscience, for whenever he saw himself likely to be taken prisoner he did his best to remove the broad stripe on his trousers which distinguished his branch of the service.

On August 30th the enemy concentrated fresh troops in the south and east and attempted to break our encircling ring from without. From Myszaniec - that is, from the direction of Ostrolenka - he brought up new and strong columns to Neidenburg and Ortelsburg against our troops, which had already completely enveloped the Russian centre and were therefore presenting their rear to the new foe.

There was danger ahead; all the more so because airmen reported that enemy columns twenty-three miles long - therefore very strong - were pressing forward from Mlawa. Yet we refused to let go of our quarry.

Samsonof's main force had to be surrounded and annihilated; Francois and Mackensen sent their reserves - weak reserves, it is true - to meet the new enemy. Against their resistance the attempt to mitigate the catastrophe to Samsonof came to naught.

While despair seized on those within the deadly ring, faint-heartedness paralyzed the energies of those who might have brought their release. In this respect, too, the course of events at the Battle of Tannenberg confirmed the human and military experience of yore.

Our ring of fire round the Russian masses, crowded closely together and swaying this way and that, became closer and narrower with every hour that passed.

Rennenkampf appears to have intended to attack the line of the Deime, east of Konigsberg and between Labiau and Tapiau, this day. From the region of Landsberg and Bartenstein his masses of cavalry were approaching the battlefield of Tannenberg. However, we had already concentrated strong forces, weary but flushed with victory, for defence in the neighbourhood of Allenstein.

August 31 was the day of harvesting for such of our troops as were still engaged, a day of deliberation about the further course of operations for our leaders, and for Rennenkampf the day of the retreat to the Deime-Allenburg-Angerburg line.

As early as the 29th the course of events had enabled me to report the complete collapse of the Russian Narew Army to my All-Highest War Lord. The very same day the thanks of His Majesty, in the name of the Fatherland, had reached me on the battlefield. I transferred these thanks, in my heart as with my lips, to my Chief of Staff and our splendid troops.

On August 31st I was able to send the following report to my Emperor and King:

I beg most humbly to report to Your Majesty that the ring round the larger part of the Russian Army was closed yesterday. The 13th, 15th and 18th Army Corps have been destroyed. We have already taken more than 60,000 prisoners, among them the Corps Commanders of the 13th and 15th Corps.

The guns are still in the forests and are now being brought in. The booty is immense though it cannot yet be assessed in detail. The Corps outside our ring, the 1st and 6th, have also suffered severely and are now retreating in hot haste through Mlawa and Myszaniec.

The troops and their leaders had accomplished extraordinary feats. The divisions were now in bivouacs and the hymn of thanks of the Battle of Leuthen rose from them.

In our new Headquarters at Allenstein I entered the church, close by the old castle of the Teutonic Knights, while divine service was being held. As the clergyman uttered his closing words all those present, young soldiers as well as elderly Landsturm, sank to their knees under the overwhelming impression of their experiences. It was a worthy curtain to their heroic achievements.

Source: *Source Records of the Great War, Vol. II*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni 1923*
Found online at: http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/tannenberg_hindenburg.htm