

## Germany's Decision to Conduct Unrestricted U-boat Warfare, 1916

---

*We are now faced with a choice: Verdun or a U-boat war.*

—Wilhelm II, quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

*If we release the U-boats it will lead to our ruin.*

—Vice Chancellor Karl Helfferich, quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

*Finis Germaniae [The end of Germany].*

—German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg's assessment of the decision, quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly*

### Germany's Dilemma

Two and a half years into World War I, under the strong influence of his military chiefs and nationalist lobbies, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II approved the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare against U.S. and other neutral ships en route to Europe with supplies for Germany's enemies. This decision precipitated the American entry into World War I on the side of Great Britain and France. So divided and horrified by Europe's carnage had the Americans been that it took such a flagrantly unfriendly act to convince President Woodrow Wilson and Congress that neutrality was no longer strategically, politically, or morally sustainable.

The Germans made this decision after much debate and weighing of benefits and risks. It was far from a mindless blunder by some charismatic or psychotic leader. But it did involve a gross miscalculation of both benefits and risks, the former of which were to prove illusory and the latter real. While perhaps not as irrational as some of this study's other cases, German deliberations leading to the U-boat decision were distorted

by political polarization, with the prevailing side willfully sacrificing objectivity for the sake of advocacy. By aligning the United States with Britain and France, the German decision gave those two countries renewed determination to fight until victorious and to exclude the kind of negotiated settlement that might have ended the war without German defeat. As we will see, German decisionmakers could have known that this gamble to win the war would more likely result in losing it. They underestimated both British resolve and American competence.

It was obvious by 1916 that Germany could not, as things were going, defeat Great Britain and then overpower France on the Western Front. The ability of the British to keep fighting depended on transatlantic supplies from the United States, which Germany was unable to constrict after halting submarine attacks on neutral shipping when Wilson reacted angrily to the 1915 sinking of the RMS *Lusitania*.<sup>1</sup> By the same token, the prospects of the British and French defeating Germany on land were also dim. Trench warfare was taking a massive human toll on both sides, with nothing but a few kilometers this way or that to show for it. This was not the war German military leaders and militarists had expected or known, given the string of decisive victories scored by their Prussian forebears.

Back at sea, the Battle of Jutland in 1916 was a tactical draw but strategic victory for Britain in that the Royal Navy prevented the German High Seas Fleet from breaking out of the North Sea into the open Atlantic. After that, Germany's navy was largely idle, while Britain's continued enforcing a Continental blockade that sapped Germany's ability to achieve victory on land. If Germany could not upset this military equilibrium, it faced a choice between a prolonged, debilitating stalemate and a negotiated peace. While German statesmen were receptive to what Wilson coined *peace without victory* (as explained Chapter Six), German generals and admirals adamantly opposed a negotiation that would rob them of a glorious triumph, hard-won territorial gains, and a place in the pantheon of Prussian military heroes.

## Kaiser in a Corner

Even after Wilhelm II sidelined the ultra-hawk Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, German generals Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, aided by the powerful General Staff, petitioned the kaiser to end restrictions on U-boat warfare and start sinking American and other neutral ships. Otherwise, they argued, Germany would “risk being cheated of what [they] hope[d] to gain from the war.”<sup>2</sup> The military leaders' position was supported by parties of the Right and Center in the Reichstag, much of the press, and the most vocal segments of public opinion. In Germany's jingoist wartime atmosphere, and with Britain's blockade causing severe deprivation, only the dovish Social Democrats, a few industrialists, and pragmatic civilian leaders opposed targeting U.S. ships. Among the last group, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg warned

that resumption of U-boat attacks on U.S. vessels would “inevitably [cause] America to join our enemies,” leading to Germany’s ultimate defeat.<sup>3</sup> The German ambassador to the United States, Count Johann Heinrich von Bernstorff, “whose non-Prussian birth . . . spared him many of the delusions of his peers,” warned that unshackling the U-boats would cause Germany to lose the war.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, the proponents of relaxing restrictions on U-boat operations did not challenge the argument that the measure would bring America into the war; rather, they claimed it did not matter. Specifically, the German military chiefs argued that Great Britain could not long endure heavy fighting without supplies from the United States and other neutrals. Then, either its army would fold or London would sue for peace to end suffering at home, with France sure to follow. Germany would thus achieve victory in the war as a whole; retain its territorial conquests, for example, Belgium and Alsace-Lorraine (taken in 1871); demand the cession of colonies; dominate Europe politically and economically; and be a world power second to none. The chancellor and opponents of unrestricted U-boat warfare argued that such a lunge for victory would instead bring defeat; they favored ending the war with an acceptable negotiated peace.

Ludendorff and company thus conceded that the United States would probably enter the war if Germany ended restrictions on U-boat warfare. However, they insisted that Great Britain would submit well before the United States could introduce enough troops to alter the military balance on the Western Front. Their forecast was that the British could not last until their next harvest, whereas the Americans would not arrive in force on the Continent until 1919—a precision that implied great faith in their script. As it turned out, both estimates on which the decision was based proved spectacularly optimistic, and the result was the opposite of what the German brass promised. That analysis confirmed the preconception and furthered the interests of those who produced it is central to understanding and drawing lessons from this case.

## The Military Prevails—Germany Loses

In January 1917, the kaiser agreed with the military’s recommendation to resume unrestricted U-boat warfare. Whether he approved, conceded, or simply rubber-stamped the military’s position, the decision was not his to make in any meaningful sense.<sup>5</sup> As military leaders gained support, determination, and confidence, civilian leaders retreated. At the climactic meeting with the kaiser, the German naval chief of staff, Henning von Holtzendorff, presented a two-hundred-page study—with statistics down to the level of the caloric content of an English breakfast—and “swore that his U-boats could sink 600,000 tons a month.”<sup>6</sup> Appealing to his desire for glory, the kaiser was told by his military chiefs that there was no other way “to guarantee our future as a world power.”<sup>7</sup> As for the U.S. Army, Hindenburg assured the kaiser that even if it was not tardy it would be “taken care of” and that “no American will set foot on the Continent.”<sup>8</sup>

Outnumbered, out-staffed, and without facts or figures, Bethmann-Hollweg again “warned that American belligerence would mean Germany’s defeat”—an argument the proponents dismissed by explaining that the war would be over before the Americans entered in force.<sup>9</sup> He gave in: “Of course, if success beckons, we must follow.”<sup>10</sup>

German military logic, per se, was not flawed. Renewed U-boat attacks on neutral shipping offered the best if not only chance to win the war, as opposed to negotiating a compromise peace. But the analysis was wrong, owing to unrealistic assumptions that Britain would crumble before American troops could save the day—assumptions that the kaiser’s military chiefs presented to him as high-confidence analytic findings. This amounted to a gaping discrepancy between the decisionmakers’ strategic model and objective reality. That these miscalculations and misjudgments were made by institutions, not a unitary decisionmaker, suggests an important lesson: Institutions are not always safeguards against blunders; they can contribute to them.

In response to the decision, the United States immediately broke off diplomatic relations with Germany and eight weeks later declared war. As advertised by German admirals, U-boats started sinking transatlantic shipping at an unprecedented rate: 25 percent of all British-bound shipping was sunk in March. By April the German admiralty’s prediction of tonnage sunk was being exceeded.<sup>11</sup>

However, the adoption of transatlantic convoying and deployment of U.S. Navy escorts slowed and then reversed the U-boat threat. German submarine captains were forced to choose between going after a dwindling number of nonconvoyed vessels and trying to penetrate escort screens around the convoys in which most ships were bunched. On those routes where convoying was introduced, shipping losses declined sharply, as shown in Table 5.1.

Meanwhile, although the Americans entered the war grossly unprepared for large-scale fighting in Europe, they mobilized their forces and ramped up their industrial base much faster than the German military had forecast. While they conceded that the United States would declare war on Germany, Ludendorff and company failed to anticipate the galvanizing effect their action had on American determination and resourcefulness. Six months after the declaration of war, the first U.S. division entered the trenches.<sup>12</sup> Although it was not until well into 1918 that the U.S. military presence was sizeable enough to turn the tide of battle, the positive effects on British resolve began when they first arrived. The method used by General John J. Pershing to expedite the U.S. combat contribution was to train units as they assembled in France and send them piecemeal into battle as soon as they were ready. This way of introducing U.S. forces was expeditious but necessitated organizational flexibility—something that violated German military doctrine and surprised German planning. There is no indication that German generals anticipated this U.S. approach any better than German admirals anticipated escorted convoying.

By the time U.S. forces began to pour into the trenches, shipping losses to German U-boats were down to the level prior to the resumption of unrestricted warfare. Trans-

**Table 5.1**  
**Allied and Neutral Tonnage Sunk by Submarines in World War I**

Month	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918
January	-	47,981	81,259	368,521	306,658
February	-	59,921	117,547	540,006	318,957
March	-	80,775	167,097	593,841	342,597
April	-	55,725	191,667	881,027	278,719
May	-	120,058	129,175	596,629	295,520
June	-	131,428	108,851	687,507	255,587
July	-	109,640	118,215	557,988	260,967
August	-	185,866	162,744	511,730	283,815
September	98,378	151,884	230,460	351,748	187,881
October	87,917	88,534	353,660	458,558	118,559
November	19,413	153,043	311,508	289,212	17,682
December	44,197	123,141	355,139	399,212	-

SOURCE: C. Ernest Fayle, *Seaborne Trade*: Vol. 3, London: J. Murray, 1924, Table I[a].

atlantic supplies to Britain reached new highs, just the opposite of what the Germans scripted. Two million U.S. troops were in France by the time of the 1918 armistice, a year before Ludendorff claimed that the first of them would arrive. Among the glaring failures of German analysis was its consistent underestimating of the capability and strategy of the green U.S. military.<sup>13</sup>

The kaiser dismissed Bethmann-Hollweg a few months after the war on American shipping was resumed (but before the U-boat campaign stalled). His successor (Georg Michaelis) was timid, inept, and politically no match for military machinations and bluster. Wilhelm II became a figurehead. For the remainder of the war, Germany was governed by an unofficial military dictatorship, mainly led by the officer most responsible for the misguided U-boat decision, Ludendorff. The added weight of American forces, combined with Britain's reinvigorated war effort, was more than Germany's military could withstand. As shelves were restocked in England, the suffering of Germany's population grew. In a last-ditch attempt to avoid defeat by negotiating peace, Germany discontinued unrestricted U-boat warfare in October 1918.

## Why Were the Risks Minimized?

For Germany's military leaders, not losing the war was not good enough: Germany had to win, and it had the military superiority to do so. This was a matter of Prussian hubris and determination to make greater Germany the dominant power in Europe and a world power equal to if not higher than Britain. The military leadership was not wrong to equate victory with knocking the British out of the war, which required stopping transatlantic shipping. The fact that Germany's land-war fortunes against Britain and France had suffered during 1915–1916, while U-boat attacks on neutral shipping were suspended, underscored the importance, as the German military saw it, of changing this policy.<sup>14</sup> This became the blinding idea that animated German military argument and skewed German military analysis. The German military was unified: The army needed help in the form of strangling Britain, and the navy, frustrated by being sidelined after Jutland, was eager to oblige by using its best weapon.<sup>15</sup> The Germans were right to recognize the potential of the submarine, but wrong to overlook how it could be countered.

Again, the crux of the German military's theory of victory was that Britain, deprived of supplies, would be forced to seek peace before the United States entered the conflict. Yet there was little evidence of flagging British will or increasing interest in peace negotiations even before the German U-boat decision. Moreover, the Germans failed to appreciate that U.S. entry, owing to their own action, would revive British determination. Not foreseeing the adoption of an escorted convoy system and underestimating that the United States would make its military weight felt were fatal analytic mistakes. However, the advocates of the U-boat strategy had done their homework. An obvious inference to draw is that, for all their data, Germany's military leaders were so sure of their instincts, so enthralled with German military superiority, and so captivated by the idea of victory that they misled themselves. After that, misleading, or else just steamrolling, the kaiser was easy.

## The Worst of All Options

Did Germany have an alternative to the U-boat gamble? Barbara Tuchman argues that a smarter, better path for Germany would have been to respond favorably to Wilson's proposal for a negotiated peace. Although stalemated on the Western Front, the end of fighting in the East put Germany in a stronger overall military position than Britain and France. This would have given it leverage in negotiations and a chance for a better settlement than was possible once the United States entered the war. At a minimum, to have shown a willingness to negotiate at the time might have kept the United States from adding its strength to the Allied side.<sup>16</sup>

Even if the Germans chose not to pick up Wilson's peace initiative, they would have been better off not renewing attacks on neutral vessels. One can speculate that Wilson, as averse to entering the war as he was (see Chapter Six), would have kept the United States on the sideline:

Without America, the Allies could not have held out for victory, and as victory was probably beyond Germany's power too, both sides would have slogged to an exhausted but more or less equal peace. For the world, the consequences of that unused alternative would have changed history: no victory, no reparations, no war guilt, no Hitler, possibly no Second World War.<sup>17</sup>

Though better options existed, German military chiefs pressed for a course of action that produced defeat, as they could have known and as German statesmen explained.

Wilhelm II was an easy target, having been deceived two decades earlier by Tirpitz that Germany could and must defeat Great Britain and, under his decisive leadership, become a world power.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the U-boat decision of early 1917, Wilhelm II was indecisive, removed from the management of Germany's war effort, and under the military's sway.<sup>19</sup> This is the ironic case of the weakness of a nominally authoritarian leader opening the way for a decision by a powerful institution. Military officers, maneuvering in the open and in the shadows, held political strong cards: the backing of patriotic organizations and the public in a jingoistic mood and suffering from British blockade.

The German military leaders who orchestrated the U-boat decision were not wrong to think that the war could be won only if Great Britain was knocked out. If one grants the premise that winning the war was the only acceptable outcome, it might be argued that theirs was a gamble worth taking. But they were severely mistaken to believe—or else profoundly dishonest to assert—that the war not only could but *would* be won by unrestricted U-boat warfare. Given the risks of failure, political leaders were right to argue that a balanced negotiated peace was preferable, as it was possible. By late 1916, British and French military prospects were at least as bad as Germany's; and, as we will see, Wilson was eager to mediate an end to the fighting.

Can the U-boat blunder be blamed on defective knowledge due to inadequate or bad information? Not really. Had they sought it, the German military probably could have received better intelligence and objective analysis about what the United States might do to combat the U-boats, how long Great Britain could hold out, and how long it would take the United States to bring force to bear on the Western Front. The alternative explanation—that the German generals were entirely objective but simply got it wrong—is hard to square with the fact that their findings uniformly fit and confirmed their theory of success. The normal human aversion to risk was trumped by the abnormal confidence and commitment to victory of Germany's military leaders. They did not ask what would happen, or what they could do, if their assumptions and calcula-

tions proved overly optimistic. This is especially unpardonable because German brass knew better than anyone did that the analysis was cooked.

Another way of accounting for the German blunder was that the two options in play—maintain or end restrictions on U-boat warfare—were not assessed side by side in any balanced or thorough way. As already noted, the military was united behind the U-boat scheme, and civilian officials by and large were opposed. Accounts of the climactic meeting with the kaiser indicate that he was not presented with analysis to compare the two options. Rather, he was presented with an insistent military position on one side and wilting skepticism from an exhausted chancellor on the other.<sup>20</sup> Partisan and bureaucratic warfare, with military outmaneuvering and overpowering civilian leaders, precluded rational strategic decisionmaking. Had such a process been followed, had options, risks, and benefits been fairly analyzed and debated, civilian leaders might not have been overmatched by military adamancy. As the next case suggests, Wilson might not have brought the United States into the conflict in the absence of blatant German acts of war. In such circumstances, although Britain and France might have fought on for some time, Germany could have negotiated a reasonably favorable peace. Instead, it was forced to oppose more or less alone the combined strength of Britain, France, and the United States, and to accept a devastating and poisonous peace.

More interesting than the relationship between the institution and the individual involved in the U-boat decision—the German military and the kaiser—is the character and discipline of the institution. Generals and admirals told each other what they wanted to hear, and staffs were expected to “tell truth to power.” As time passed, fighting at the front stalemated, and public-patriotic impatience intensified, a unified and irresistible institutional position emerged. As it did, instead of trying to measure risks, the military sought to minimize them.