

# **Battle of Tannenberg: The Success of German Operations in East Prussia in August 1914**

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## ABSTRACT

The Battle of Tannenberg was one of the first major battles of World War I, fought between Russia and Germany in East Prussia. The early decisions of German leadership in World War I, and consequently the Eastern Front, resulted from the German war plan of 1914. However, Eighth Army's operations in East Prussia did not adhere to the plan's original course of action. Although outnumbered, the Imperial German Army successfully and overwhelmingly outperformed the Russian First and Second Armies in mobilization, strategic and tactical execution, logistics, and reconnaissance. The Battle of Tannenberg was one of Germany's earliest, most decisive tactical victories.

*Keywords:* World War I, Germany, Russia, East Prussia, Tannenberg, Eastern Front, Tactics, 1914, Alexander Samsonov, Helmuth von Moltke

# **Batalla de Tannenberg: el éxito de las operaciones alemanas en Prusia Oriental en agosto de 1914**

## RESUMEN

La Batalla de Tannenberg fue una de las primeras grandes batallas de la Primera Guerra Mundial, librada entre Rusia y Alemania en Prusia Oriental. Las primeras decisiones del liderazgo alemán en la Primera Guerra Mundial y, en consecuencia, el Frente Oriental, fueron el resultado del plan de guerra alemán de 1914. Sin embargo, las operaciones del Octavo Ejército en Prusia Oriental no se adhirieron al curso de acción original del plan. Aunque superado en número, el Ejército Imperial Alemán superó con éxito y abrumadoramente al Primer y Segundo Ejército Ruso en movilización, ejecución estratégica y táctica, logística y reconocimiento. La Batalla de Tannenberg fue una de las victorias tácticas más tempranas y decisivas de Alemania.

**Palabras clave:** Primera Guerra Mundial, Alemania, Rusia, Prusia Oriental, Tannenberg, Frente Oriental, Táctica, 1914, Alexander Samsonov, Helmuth von Moltke

## 坦能堡战役：1914年8月德军在东普鲁士的成功作战

### 摘要

坦能堡战役是第一次世界大战的主要战役之一，这场战役由俄罗斯和德国在东普鲁士进行交战。德国领导层在第一次世界大战以及随后的东线战争中所作的早期决定源于1914年的德国战争计划。不过，第8集团军在东普鲁士的行动并未遵循该计划最初的行动方针。尽管人数少于俄军，但德意志帝国陆军在动员、战略和战术执行、后勤以及侦察方面成功地以压倒性方式超过了俄罗斯第1和第2集团军。坦能堡战役是德国最早、最具决定性的战术胜利之一。

关键词：第一次世界大战，德国，俄罗斯，东普鲁士，坦能堡，东线，战术，1914年，亚历山大·萨姆索诺夫，赫尔穆特·冯·莫尔特克

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**W**orld War I erupted between the Entente and Central Powers less than one month before the decisive German victory on the Eastern Front at the Battle of Tannenberg in August 1914. Preceding Tannenberg was the Battle of Gumbinnen. Gumbinnen was an Eastern Front battle fought as part of the German war plan of 1914. The German war plan was fluid and had changed from year-to-year preceding World War I in response to Europe's and the East's geopolitical landscape. The Schlieffen Plan, named after its creator Alfred von Schlieffen, informed the German war plan of 1914. The war plan proposed that the Ger-

man Army could defend against and defeat a numerically superior enemy on two fronts.

First, a rapid, large-scale, flanking maneuver would create a double envelopment around one enemy. Then, once annihilated, the same maneuver replicated against the remaining force, and a war of attrition on two fronts avoided.<sup>1</sup> German military leadership had held to this plan with some modifications since 1905, following the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War. Belief in the strategic superiority of this plan was the basis of German operational and strategic planning before and during World War I.

After Germany's defeat at the Battle of Gumbinnen, adherence to the German war plan remained primarily intact. However, forces were pulled from the Western Front to bolster German defenses in East Prussia. The decision was made in response to the First and Second Russian armies launching an offensive culminating in the Battle of Tannenberg. The offensive was to prove ill-conceived and Tannenberg a disaster for Russia. Germany's victory at the Battle of Tannenberg resulted from superior tactics compounded by Russian failures in cooperation, mobilization, logistics, and deficits in intelligence.

## **Command and Tactical Decisions: Prelude to Battle**

**T**annenberg is known today as Stębark, Poland. During World War I, Tannenberg fell within the boundaries of East Prussia, approximately 20 miles west of the Polish and Prussian border, surrounded by numerous lakes. In the days leading up to August 26, the Russian Second Army, commanded by Alexander Samsonov, made slow progress crossing into East Prussia. The First and Second Army Field Commander Yakov Zhilinski, anxious to put the German Eighth Army on its heels in the wake of Gumbinnen, was not satisfied. Difficulties stemming from poor logistical capabilities in transportation and truncated lines of communication created tension among Russian leadership. Division and corps commanders complained of poor supply and the dogged pace demanded by Zhilinski, who, disregarding the complaints of

his subordinates, ordered increased aggression in the armies' advance as he perceived an absence of German opposition.<sup>2</sup>

The advance was fragmented, and Second Army was spread thin. Forward lines differed across the broken front, dependent upon the progress made by each of the Second Army's corps, the product of which was a disorganized and fractured push into East Prussia rather than a coordinated and consolidated front. Advance into East Prussia began on August 21 and continued through the 25<sup>th</sup>. An approximate span of 60 miles separated the Second Army's left and right flanks.<sup>3</sup> To the north sat the Russian First Army under Paul von Rennenkampf. However, Rennenkampf had remained stationary under the pretense that the German Eighth Army was in retreat and failed to capitalize on the Russian victory at Gumbinnen. As a result, Russian forces outnumbered those of the Germans in the Battle of Tannenberg and Russia carried the momentum on the Eastern Front following the recent victory. However, the disorganized Russian advance, stunted pressure from First Army in the north, and thinly spread forces proved tactical errors that contributed to German victory.

General Maximilian von Prittwitz commanded the German Eighth Army and Major General Count von Waldersee served as his Chief of Staff. Though Eighth Army had halted Russian defensive incursions into East Prussia per the German war plan, defeat at the Battle of Gumbinnen and Prittwitz's

command decisions shortly after resulted in a German change of command. Prittwitz had learned from reconnaissance reports conducted by German aircraft that the Russian Second Army had initiated movement into East Prussia from the south. His plans to attack Rennenkampf's First Army to the north relied on the target's continued isolation from any relief support. The plan was that after annihilating the northern threat, he would shift his forces to destroy the Second Army in the south.<sup>4</sup>

Prittwitz's operational concept was like the German war plan, but on a smaller scale. Both plans intended to prevent fighting on two fronts by concentrating forces to defeat one enemy and the subsequent annihilation of the remaining enemy. Prittwitz's nerves got the best of him, and he was afraid that a possible Russian third army, which did not exist, intended to move in and block the Eighth Army's path of retreat to the Vistula River. The path to the Vistula needed to remain open to the Germans if the Russian First Army found success in its northern advance.<sup>5</sup> The possibility of a retreat was a fact that seemingly remained at the forefront of Prittwitz's mind.

With the sudden advance of the Russian Second Army to the south and uncertainty in the north because of Rennenkampf's inexplicable decision to remain stationary, General Prittwitz ordered the Eighth Army to retreat. His withdrawal decision and anxiety conveyed to Moltke via telephone caught his superior unaware and cemented his and his chief of staff's relief from com-

mand. The two men were replaced on August 22 by Generals Paul von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff.

Along with leadership changes, Moltke ordered the 11<sup>th</sup> and Reserve Guard Corps and the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division to the east. This decision was, in the words of German Lieutenant Colonel Max Hoffman, a "fatal dispatch."<sup>6</sup> Reinforcements from the Western Front did not arrive in time to participate in the Battle of Tannenberg and, in Hoffman's opinion, only weakened German strength to the west where it was most required.

## **Russian Force Composition and Resources**

Russian forces exceeded that of the German Eighth Army at Tannenberg. Rennenkampf's First Army consisted of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Corps, each composed of two infantry divisions; detached divisions augmented the First Army and included the 56<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, five cavalry divisions, one rifle brigade, and one heavy artillery brigade. Samsonov's Second Army consisted of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, and 23<sup>rd</sup> Corps; detached divisions included three cavalry divisions, one rifle brigade, and one heavy artillery brigade.<sup>7</sup> The two armies to invade East Prussia totaled approximately 200,000 men.

Though only some Russian soldiers were fit for combat or were literate, soldiers in service were not volunteers. Russia required military service of all



Paul Ludwig Hans Anton von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg, b. October 2nd, 1847, d. August 2nd, 1934. Hindenburg was a German Field Marshal during World War I and later became the second elected president of the German Weimar Republic in 1925 until his death in 1934. Source: *Paul Von Beneckendorff Und Von Hindenburg (1847-1934). Hamburg - Your Guide to Exploring, Living, & Working in Hamburg*. DPA Picture Alliance. Accessed October 25, 2022. <https://www.hamburg.de/ehrenbuerger/biographien/ehrenbuerger-1900-1999/4659096/hindenburg/>.

eligible men between 20 and 43 years of age, and the requirement extended to all ethnic groups throughout the Russian Empire. The British military attaché to Russia Brigadier General Knox believed many officers and NCOs, partly due to corruption in selection boards and a general lack of combat experience were of low quality, and fifty percent of the enlisted men illiterate.<sup>8</sup>

Russian firepower further plagued the invasion of East Prussia. Since their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, Russia required military reform. However, disagreement amongst leadership stymied reform. Russia's weak industrial production capacity further exacerbated the issue. Reform was finally enacted in 1913 though it proved too late and had a negligible

impact by August 1914. Poor industrial production and transportation lines between ammunition depots and the front lines resulted in Russian artillery amounting to a whimper. A meager 420 rounds per gun and 108 artillery pieces were available to each corps at the onset of the invasion compared to Germany's thundering 3,000 rounds per gun and 166 pieces per corps.<sup>9</sup>

Shortages in Russian armament extended beyond artillery pieces to automatic weapons. Machine guns amounted to eight guns per regiment, totaling a paltry thirty-two per division. However, in what became a war of attrition, Russia had an advantage in troop numbers. Russian mobilization brought the 1.3-million-man Army to over five million, which earned the Russian Army the nickname "Russian Steamroller."

## **German Force Composition and Resources**

**T**he German Eighth Army was the defensive bulwark on the Eastern Front tasked with delaying the Russian advance into East Prussia. The remainder of the German Army mobilized against France on the Western Front per the German war plan. Though Eighth Army's strategic role meant reduced force composition numbers in contrast to the Russian invasion force, Germany brought what the Russians lacked to East Prussia: preparedness. The Eighth Army consisted of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Corps, each composed of two infantry divisions like the Russian First and Second Army. In addition, the 1<sup>st</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> Reserve Divisions were

augmenting the German forces, along with the *Hoherer Landwehr-Kommando* No. 1 and the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division.<sup>10</sup>

German preparedness was evident before mobilization and attributable to multiple factors. First, Germany had superior training regimens and reformed its officer corps. Rather than promoting officers from selected aristocrats, the officer corps recruited from trained, capable men selected based on performance rather than status. Further, its mechanized transport system and peacetime training exercises focused on acquiring and using civilian resources for rapid war-time mobilization and contributed to Germany's successful mobilization.<sup>11</sup>

Eighth Army's advance into East Prussia also had the benefit of pre-established lines of transportation which moved troops, artillery pieces, and ammunition resupply from rear storage depots to the front lines, a significant factor in a German victory. General Vasily Gurko, Russian commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division, First Army, wrote in his memoirs, "...the Germans possessed great superiority in guns of all descriptions, particularly howitzers and heavy guns." He further noted that his cavalry "could always see following the enemy long columns of motor-transport of all types filled with troops."<sup>12</sup> Though the Battle of Gumbinnen ended in defeat for the Germans, Russian inactivity, coupled with German preparedness, allowed Eighth Army to quickly regroup and shift both men and war materiel to counter Samsonov's drive from the south, setting the stage for the Battle of Tannenberg.



General Alexander Vasilyevich Samsonov, b. November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1859, d. August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1914. General Samsonov was a career cavalry officer in the Imperial Russian Army and served in both the Russo-Japanese War and in World War I. He died by suicide in Poland during the Battle of Tannenberg. Source: Ullstein Bild. *General Alexander Samsonov*. *History.com*. Getty Images, 2022. <https://www.history.com/news/battle-tannenberg>.

## **The Battle of Tannenberg**

**G**erman leadership learned of Samsonov's movements through aerial reconnaissance. Second Army had advanced well ahead of First Army, the two separated by the Masurian Lakes, between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of August and was in a vulnerable position. The battle plan called for a coordinated advance intended to place both Russian armies in a position to encircle the Eighth Army. However, Rennenkampf's inactivity allowed Eighth Army to avoid encirclement and launch an attack on Second Army, isolating them from the First.

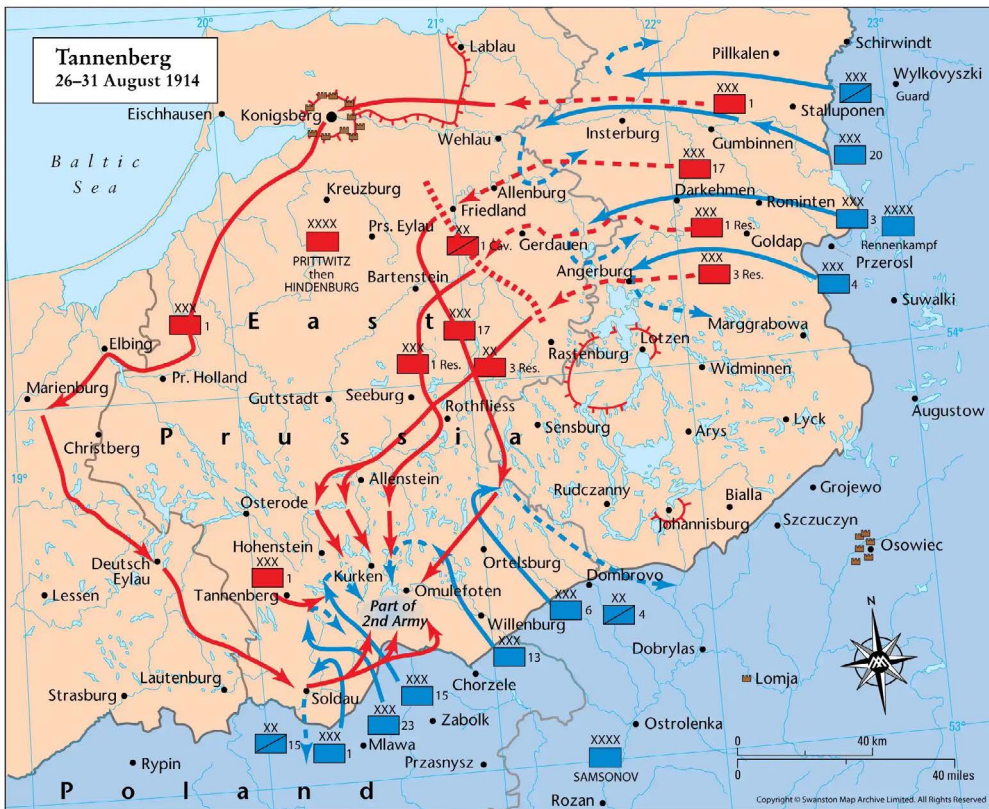
Attacking the Second Army was a reversal of the original plan brought about by Prittwitz's ordered retreat and Samsonov's rushed advance of the Second Army from the south. Hindenburg halted Prittwitz's retreat and reallocated forces in northern East Prussia towards the south to counter Samsonov's movements. Field Marshal August von Mackensen sent the 17<sup>th</sup> Corps, the 1<sup>st</sup> Reserve Corps, and the 6<sup>th</sup> Landwehr Brigade south to support the German right under Generals Friedrich von Scholtz and his 20<sup>th</sup> Corps and Hermann von Francois and his 1st Corps.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian Second Army's left and right flanks spread over a 60-mile

front by August 26. The 6<sup>th</sup> Corps stood halted at Bischofsburg on the far-right flank of the Second Army, and the 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry anchored on the left near Lautenburg. Fighting on the first day of Tannenberg took place across 60 miles between the two cities.

Russian disregard for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering significantly influenced Second Army's earliest movements, and Samsonov was unaware of the German strength hidden beyond the Seeben Heights between Tannenberg and Lautenburg.

The German 5<sup>th</sup> Landwehr Brigade was at Lautenburg and was the only detected German formation that, to Samsonov, appeared as an easy and isolated target. Second Army was so hyper-focused on its southerly left flank, on account of previous reports which indicated German troop movement in that direction, that its northern positions were deemed unthreatened. The Second Army thought little of German threats to the north and moved a brigade from its right flank to the south to attack Lautenburg along with the 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.



Battle of Tannenberg, 26 – 31 August 1914. The map demonstrates the whole of the battle and Second Army's retreat and eventual encirclement. Source: Swanston, Alex. "The Battle of Tannenberg 26-30 August 1914." 2022. Map. *The Map Archive*. <https://www.themaparchive.com/product/the-battle-of-tannenberg-2630-august/>.



Initial contact between the belligerents occurred in Seeben Heights and Lautenburg. Francois had been ordered to attack the Heights with his German 1<sup>st</sup> Corps at 0730 on the 26<sup>th</sup> but disobeyed. He finally moved 1<sup>st</sup> Corps and took the heights at 1300. Eighth Army had further success in the south. The 5<sup>th</sup> Landwehr had staved off Second Army's attempt to capture Lautenburg. 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's 23<sup>rd</sup> Corps towards Second Army's center was also halted in its advance and forced to scatter and fall back between Lippau and Neidenburg. However, only some of the Second Army's advances were failures.

15<sup>th</sup> Corps, to the center of the Russian left flank, fared somewhat better in their advance and captured Hohenstein. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corps to the right of the 15<sup>th</sup> also fared well in its advance toward Allenstein.<sup>14</sup> The Russian right remained on the defensive during the 26<sup>th</sup>. Mackensen's 23<sup>rd</sup> attacked the Russian right at Rothfliess and pushed them back beyond Bischofsburg. The action resulted in the loss of over 5,000 men and the capture of critical Russian artillery and machine guns.<sup>15</sup> German encirclement of the Second Army had begun on both Russian flanks.

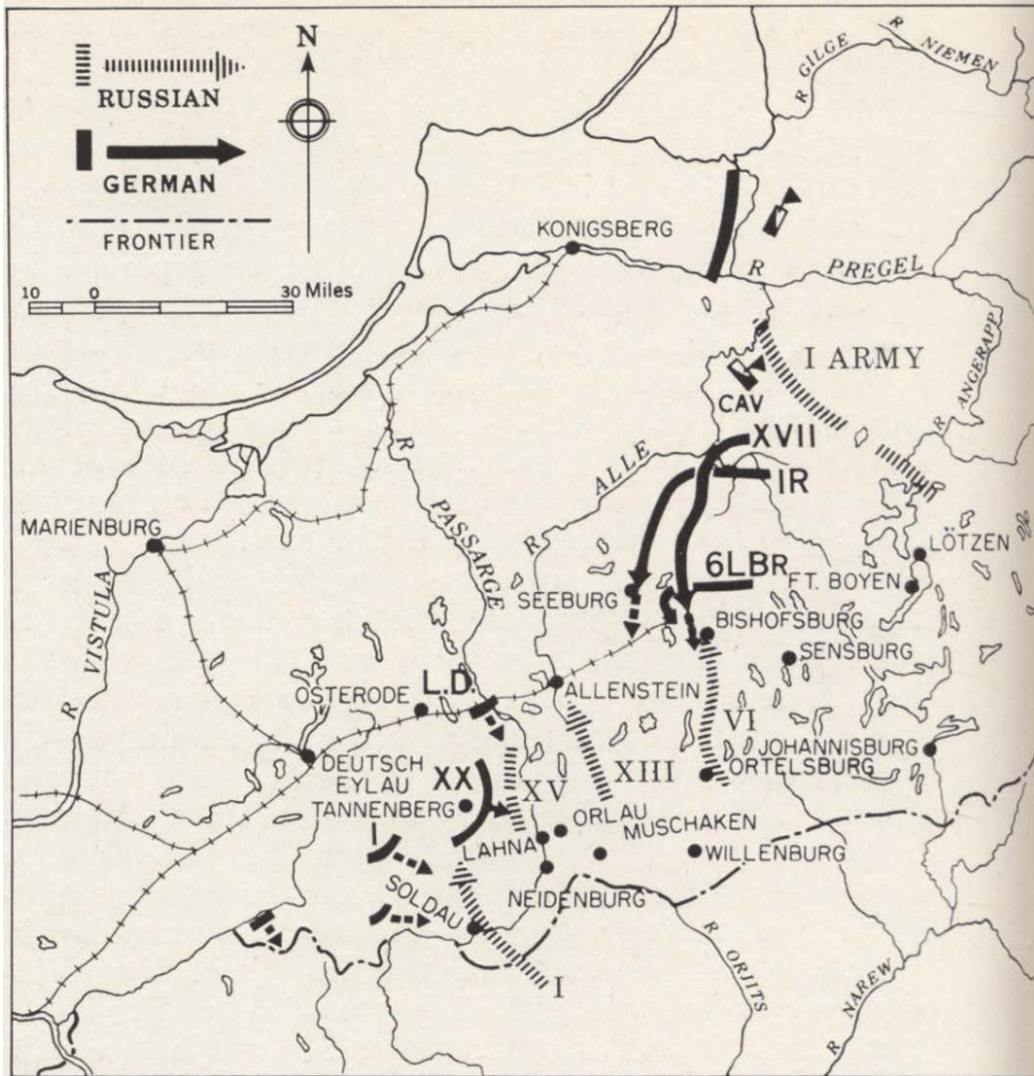
August 27 proved a fateful day for the Russian left. Eighth Army leadership ordered a 4 a.m. artillery bombardment on Usdau, which forced Russian General Artamonov's 1<sup>st</sup> Corps back from its forward position, turning the Russian left flank. Again, a victim of poor reconnaissance and lines of communication, Samsonov was uninformed of the attack or its results. The

Russian center's 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Corps became a mass of confusion. The 13<sup>th</sup> moved north into Allenstein by late afternoon against scant opposition. The 15<sup>th</sup> was split between Hohenstein and Muhlen and was checked in its advance to Osterode by the German 20<sup>th</sup> Corps.

Unaware of frontline action, Samsonov issued the order for advancing brigades to change direction. The German right moved in to support the center after recent success on the Russian left. General Gorko said of Samsonov, "Unfortunately, just at this time, the retreat of the two flanking corps, of which Samsonoff was totally unaware, was leading hour by hour towards the catastrophe which was ultimately to overtake the corps in the centre."<sup>16</sup>

On August 28, the Russian 6<sup>th</sup> Corps to the far right fell back behind Ortelsburg. Not until the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup> was Samsonov informed of events at Rothfliess and Bischofsburg that had occurred two days earlier. The 13<sup>th</sup> Corps' leadership at Allenstein was also unaware of German advances on the Russian right flank and, under orders from Samsonov, prepared to move troops west towards the taxed 15<sup>th</sup> Corps. Mackensen and his forces rapidly redeployed forces to the west after orders from Ludendorff arrived with instructions to take Allenstein.

The German left flank engaged the 13<sup>th</sup> and prevented its south-westerly trek towards Hohenstein to reinforce the 15<sup>th</sup>. Samsonov still believed that the 13<sup>th</sup> was *en route* and ordered the commander of the 15<sup>th</sup>, General Martos, to abandon the forward lines to prepare



German Re-Deployment, 27-28 August. General Samsonov ordered the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps to Allenstein, the divided 15<sup>th</sup> corps near Hohenstein. Samsonov was unaware of the German right's re-deployment to the center upon giving the order. Source: Henniker, Mark. "The Battle of Tannenberg, 1914." *The Military Engineer* 50, no. 338 (1958): 442-49. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/44560758>.

the two corps, along with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, to fall back and regroup at Neidenburg.<sup>17</sup> However, a reconsolidation of forces did not occur because General Francois and the German 1<sup>st</sup> Corps held the Russian rally point of Neidenburg by evening on the 28th.

Samsonov ordered a full retreat without intelligence of the front lines to the commander of the 15<sup>th</sup> Corps on the 29th. The 13<sup>th</sup> moved to Chorzele, near the center of the Second Army. The 15<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> moved to Yanou toward the East-Prussian and Polish bor-

der. Lieutenant General Nikolai Klyuev, commander of the 13<sup>th</sup> Corps, and the remaining commanders attempted to follow Samsonov's final orders and began a southerly retreat toward Poland. The retreat was a colossal failure for the 15<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>. Trapped between Eighth Army's 20<sup>th</sup> Corps and several divisions from the west, along with the closing pincer of Mackensen and the 17<sup>th</sup> from the east, they surrendered.

Klyuev and the 13<sup>th</sup> fared somewhat better and evaded capture. The battered 13<sup>th</sup> Corps and remnants of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> were found along the retreat route and temporarily evaded capture. Samsonov and the Second Army's woeful communication lines, a noticeable blemish in battle plans before Tannenberg, had again crippled Second Army's operational capabilities and brought the destruction of two of the Second Army's corps.

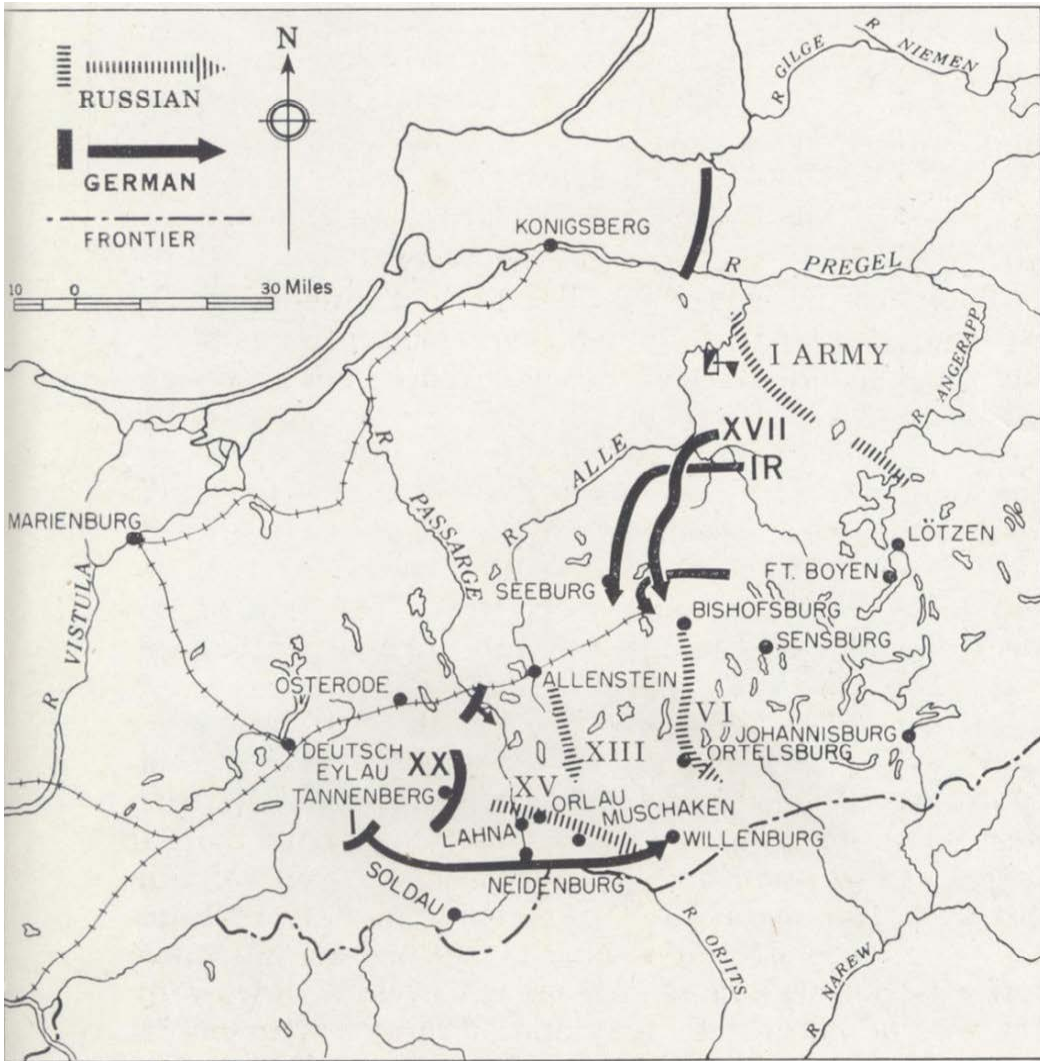
August 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> comprised the battle's closing maneuvers. The 30<sup>th</sup> was the final encirclement of the Russian Second Army by the German Eighth. The 31<sup>st</sup> consisted of Eighth Army locating and containing the dispersed remnants of Russian forces, including both the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Corps commanders Klyuev and Martos. Samsonov was dead. His body was identified and collected by German soldiers. He had committed suicide in the woods during a failed flight after he issued the final order to retreat across the Polish border.<sup>18</sup> Hindenburg described August 31 as "the day of harvesting for such of our troops as were still engaged."<sup>19</sup> German records, though inflated, indi-

cate that with the annihilation of three Russian army corps, Germany captured over 60,000 prisoners, acquired over 175 artillery pieces, and caused 70,000 casualties during the Battle of Tannenberg.<sup>20</sup>

Tactically, the Battle of Tannenberg was a resounding German victory. Germany effectively crushed Russian incursion on the Eastern Front and eased the pressure of a two-front war, enabling the focus to shift to France in the west. However, Rennenkampf's First Army to the north remained in position and posed some threat to the German Eighth Army. Though not present at the Battle of Tannenberg, the 11<sup>th</sup> Reserve Guard Corps and 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry dispatched from the Western Front were still *en route* to the Eastern Front supporting Eighth Army.

## **Tannenberg and the Western Front**

**G**erman leadership miscalculated the Russian threat on the Eastern Front, sent reserve units to the Eighth Army, and chose offense over defense, contrary to the defensive posture in East Prussia prescribed by the German war plan. The plan intended to avoid a war of attrition and relied on swift, decisive victory on the tactical level to succeed strategically. Germany did act rapidly and, for the most part, adhered to the plan. However, they did so on the Eastern Front, which reversed the tactical order of Germany's war plan. In addition, Germany had become distracted by the short-term gains perceived by defeating Russia first.



Second Army's Encirclement at Tannenberg, 30 August. Second Army was completely encircled by August 30<sup>th</sup> when the German right flank swung east to Willenburg. Scattered remnants of Second Army escaped, though were pursued, captured, or killed, through the 31<sup>st</sup>. Source: Henniker, Mark. "The Battle of Tannenberg, 1914." *The Military Engineer* 50, no. 338 (1958): 442-49. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/44560758>.

Similarly, Germany, though victorious at Tannenberg, made the same decision in defeating the Russian Second Army rather than Rennenkampf and his First Army, reversing the plan. Prittwitz's indecision and order for retreat allowed Rennenkampf to remain inac-

tive and Samsonov to execute a northward thrust from Poland. The Eighth Army was forced to the offensive to intercept Samsonov and, once again, Germany took offensive action in pursuit of Rennenkampf after Tannenberg. General Gorko concluded, "The Marne

battle was lost to them because of their lack of fresh reserves and their shortage in artillery ammunition.”<sup>21</sup>

German performance at the Battle of Tannenberg was tactical-level execution of the strategic operation in the German war plan. Eighth Army was at risk of envelopment and surrounded on two fronts. Its rapid defeat of the Russian Second Army enabled an unthreatened focus on its weaker enemy in First

Army to the north. Tannenberg was an example of small-scale execution of the German war plan and convinced German military leadership that the war plan in the west would succeed. The Eighth Army’s successful operations in East Prussia resulted from superior tactics, reconnaissance, and logistical capabilities, furthered by Russia’s absent cooperation, disastrous mobilization, and tactical execution of warfare.

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