

The German Campaign in Kurland 1915

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Introduction

The Eastern Front of World War One is one of the great understudied and underappreciated chapters of the Great War. Since the Eastern Front has not been studied in depth it also means that some very interesting smaller campaigns have been almost completely ignored. One of the important overlooked campaigns is the German campaign in Kurland 1915. This was one of the Eastern Front's secondary campaigns and, as such, has received little attention. This is unfortunate as smaller campaigns can tell us a great deal about the nature of the forces involved and provide important insights into the tactical and operational innovations of the war.

The 1915 campaign in Latvia is interesting for several reasons. It is an early example of modern joint operations in which the assault on Libau (Liepaja) consisted of German army forces supported by ships of the German Baltic Fleet who also provided air reconnaissance support. Most notably, the Eastern Front in 1915, especially the Kurland campaign, saw the last the large scale cavalry operations in Europe in World War I. This campaign provides a good picture of the German Army in transition and the innovations in tactics and organization and doctrine that took place in the early months of the war. One of the things that made the German army of World War I so formidable was its ability to innovate in organization, weapons and tactics. The campaign in Kurland provides a good snapshot of the German army as it developed in the early part of the war.

Due to Allied bombing of Potsdam in April 1945 with the heavy damage to the German military archives located there, many World War I unit records were lost. Detailed daily battle coverage for Eastern Front campaigns is often missing. Luckily the military history office of the German Reichsarchiv (Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt) in the late 1920s and early 1930s produced a number of highly detailed studies of the 1915 Eastern campaigns which used the original unit battle diaries and reports and these documents still survive.¹ In addition, many German regiments and even divisions and corps, published unit histories in the 1920s and these provide extensive details of daily operations. Luckily, German cavalry regiments tended to write detailed histories and as the 1915 campaign

featured many cavalry units, these are especially useful.² Finally, several of the major figures of the campaign wrote memoirs. Of course, one can rarely get fully accurate information from memoirs, but they do tell us much about the views of the senior officers involved in planning and leading the campaign.³

The German Strategic Position in the East 1914-15

General Erich von Falkenheyn was made chief of staff in the fall of 1914 and he viewed the Western Front as the decisive front of the war. Therefore, he was always reluctant to send significant German forces to the East. Germany faced the dilemma of a two front war—and in the spring of 1915 with the entry of Italy into the war—a three front war. So the German army in the East always fought with limited forces. The Eastern Front Headquarters, Ober Ost, with von Hindenburg commanding with Ludendorff his chief of staff (to 1916 when Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over direction of the High Command (Oberste Heeresleitung- OHL), always had to debate with Falkenheyn to justify the deployment of forces to the East forces for major operations.⁴ This meant that OHL might allow the Eastern Front forces for a major operation on one part of the front, but any requests for forces beyond this tended to be denied. Thus, the operation in Kurland in the spring and summer of 1915 was very much a secondary operation was overshadowed by much larger events. But even secondary operations can have major strategic consequences.

In late 1914 and early 1915, as it became obvious that the war would last a long time, the German army underwent a massive reorganization process aimed at providing more divisions for the army and to improve command and control and add firepower to the divisions. To grow the number of divisions the divisions were reduced from four regiments (two brigades) to three regiments (one brigade) and the number of divisional artillery batteries were also reduced so as to provide a cadre for the new divisions.

The Situation on the Eastern Front – German Strategy in the East 1915

Even after the defeat of the most immediate threat to Germany, the destruction of the Russian Second Army in August September 1914 at Tannenberg, the vast Russian army in the East was still seen as a direct threat to Germany. To defend the German border along Silesia the Ninth Army was created and in January 1915 and the 10th Army created in East Prussia. The First Battle

of the Masurian Lakes (Sept 1914) was a sharp blow the Russian 1st Army, which was forced to retreat and lost 20,000 POWs. The Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes was a huge victory for the German 10th Army with the Russian 10th Army crippled– with over 100,000 POWs lost and the Russians driven out of East Prussia. By spring 1915 the Russian forces in the north were in poor shape and in a process of rebuilding.⁵

But while the Germans had the situation on their borders under control, there were serious problems along the front of Germany's ally Austria. While facing defeat against the German 8th, 9th and 10th Armies- the Russians smashed two Austrian armies in Galicia. With hundreds of thousands of Austrian casualties (two armies lost) Austria was on the ropes and desperately needed German help. Thus, in the spring of 1915 the top priority for the Germany army in the East was to help the Austrians. For this purpose, a new army, the 11th, was created with General von Mackensen as army commander and with Colonel Hans von Seeckt as his chief of staff. The new German 11th Army, with the Austrian 4th Army under its control, planned a huge breakthrough battle at Gorlice in Galicia on 2 May to open the Russian line on a broad front and force the Russians to retreat from Lemberg and beyond. Several hundred guns were concentrated and readied for a surprise offensive. The German High Command ordered that all other operations on the Eastern Front would support this one.⁶ As only a few divisions could be spared from the West Front or from the new divisions a being stood up in early 1915, there were few troops allocated to other operations in the East. The Northwestern Front sector of the front that had produced the great victories by the German 8th and 10th Armies saw divisions removed to support the German Ninth Army (before Warsaw) and the 11th Army (Galicia). If the offensive at Gorlice worked the Germans hoped for a decisive defeat of Russian armies that would result in the capture of Warsaw and all of Poland.

Why an Offensive in Kurland?

At the same time that German efforts were to be concentrated on the Galicia offensive Ober Ost saw an opportunity for a secondary offensive in Kurland. After the terrific losses at the Second Masurian Lakes the surviving divisions of the Russian 10th Army were sent to the rear to be rebuilt. With the main Russian effort against the Austrians the Russians were weak on the northwest front and Kurland was largely undefended. The Germans accurately estimated that the Russians had only 25,000 troops in the province north of Schaulen (northern Lithuania) in

April/May 1915 and these were a collection of poorly equipped reserve units, cavalry units and fortress troops.⁷ The Germans also monitored the situation at Libau and noted that the defenses of the most forward Russian coastal fortress were weak and the garrison small. In short, it was a good target of opportunity. For the German part, any offensive into Kurland would be highly limited by the small forces available to them and the lack of logistics once the Germans crossed the Russian frontier. The main German rail line to the northwestern front ended at Tilsit in East Prussia and troops and supplies could also be shipped by sea via Memel. But from those locations any advancing German forces would have to operate far from rail lines (the Russians used a broader rail gauge and the Germans could not use the Russian railroads until the track was re-laid to the European gauge) and over poor roads. Operations would have to be mobile and the lack of logistics meant that the Germans could fight no major set-piece battles as the German wagon transport system could not supply the large quantities of ammunition needed for major battles. The German logistics priority was to the south— to support the 11th Army. In the Gorlice sector the Germans had a much more extensive rail system to work with and the Germans allocated their valuable railroad units to the sector to rebuild the Russian lines as they were captured and maintain the offensive in that sector.

Along with the opportunity to advance into a weakly held sector of the front the Germans had several other reasons to attack Kurland. First of all was the political reason. The Germans wanted greater security for East Prussia. Parts of East Prussia had suffered greatly under Russian occupation from August 1914 to February 1915.⁸ A brigade sized Russian cavalry raid on Memel in March 1915, which held the city for a few days, reinforced the need to secure East Prussia.⁹

The German Navy was especially worried about the Russian naval base at Libau (Liepaja) and were justly concerned that Libau would be used as an advanced base for Russian and British Submarines. This proved to be a very legitimate concern considering the problems the Germans faced from British subs in the Baltic in 1916 and 1917. The German Baltic Fleet commander Prince Heinrich wanted Libau taken quickly and offered the full support of Baltic Fleet, which consisted mainly of cruisers and light vessels.¹⁰ Ober Ost also noted that Libau might make a useful base for German logistics for future operations. In this the German assessment was again correct as Libau had an excellent port and became a major logistics base and after its fall quickly became a major logistics base for the German army on the Eastern Front.

Finally, there were strategic/operational reasons that favored an offensive in Kurland. OHL wanted a diversionary operation to begin on the Kurland front just before the big offensive in Galicia on May 2. Such an operation, the High Command reasoned, would divert and withhold Russian reinforcements from main battle in Galicia. A successful German advance could threaten the key Russian fortress at Kaunas and a cavalry raid against Vilnius could disrupt Russian rail traffic.¹¹

Chief of staff General von Falkenhayn, from the start had been suspicious of allocating forces for the Libau operations and argued that Libau attack ought to have a lower priority in the “Big Picture”. For their part, Ober Ost argued that Libau was a constant danger to East Prussia, that it was a weakly garrisoned place and could be easily taken with weak forces. Ober Ost also argued that the German Baltic Fleet wanted this operation against Libau and assured the army of naval support. As few forces were engaged von Falkenheyn approved the operation.

Military Situation. Cavalry in 1914– A light force

Cavalry would be a big feature of all the war operations in Kurland in 1915 as there were large cavalry forces of corps size arrayed on both sides. In 1914 the mobilized German Army had 11 cavalry divisions. A division contained six cavalry regiments in 3 brigades. Each regiment had approximately 700 soldiers. Each cavalry division had 12 light guns (3 batteries), 1 machine gun company (6 heavy MGs), 1 motor transport company with a total of about 4500 rifles– not much more firepower than ONE infantry regiment. A 1914 infantry division had more than 13,000 men and 72 artillery pieces. Cavalry divisions could move quickly but had no real staying power– and were not suitable for major combat operations. The cavalry served primarily as a support arm for the infantry.¹² Russian cavalry divisions were organized in a similar way to the Germans as small mobile units with only a small artillery element. The main difference was that the Russians had many more cavalry divisions than the Germans.

The German cavalry arm saw considerable action in the early days of the war on both the Eastern and Western Fronts. While searching for the enemy the German cavalry was also expected to drive away enemy cavalry to prevent them from collecting information on German movements and dispositions.¹³ But after October 1914 there was little need for cavalry on the Western Front

which had by then settled down to positional warfare. In late 1914 some cavalry divisions were transformed into infantry divisions and others were sent to the Eastern Front where they would be of some use.

Unlike the infantry corps of the German Army, which were very permanent organizations, cavalry corps were elastic formations created for specific operations and included a mix of cavalry and some attached infantry units and were usually named after the commanding general. After each operation, divisions and brigades would normally be detached to other corps and armies and, as an operational need arose, new corps were organized for operations.¹⁴

There were few major cavalry charges by the German army in World War I. Tactics had changed considerably due to the experience of the Boer War and Russo-Japanese War. Cavalry units usually operated in partnership with infantry units and fought as combined arms formations with infantry and artillery. By 1915 the German cavalry commanders knew enough not to make direct assaults by mounted troops against prepared enemy positions, but the Russians had yet to learn this lesson and continued to use the mounted charge in their tactical repertoire. For example, on the afternoon of 10 August, 1915, a Cossack regiment made a mounted charge against the German 5th Cavalry Division's forward outposts. German machine guns and artillery literally massacred the Russian regiment.¹⁵

During the German offensive to overrun Latvia and Poland in the fall of 1915, the German cavalry had the mission to cover the relatively open flanks of the German infantry corps and to seek out and defeat Russian cavalry formations reconnaissance. For the cavalry it was a war of small operations and dismounted engagements rather than large battles. In the summer of 1915 German cavalry units often slipped through gaps in the Russian lines to raid rail lines and depots behind the front. On several occasions the German cavalry captured Russian supply columns.¹⁶ But by late 1915 the era of major cavalry operations on the Eastern Front was over as that front also became characterized by trench warfare. From October 1915 to January 1917 the 5th Cavalry Division's battle summary simply lists "Defensive operations in the Pripet Marshes."¹⁷

Cavalry Reorganized and Evolves

Cavalry was not useful in the West so in late 1914 the German High Command reorganized two cavalry divisions as infantry divisions and sent other cavalry divisions to the East where the lightly manned front gave the cavalry scope to operate. The cavalry units that remained in 1915 became hybrid divisions. Each cavalry division in the Northwest had one infantry battalion (1,000 men) assigned to it and additional machine companies assigned, as well as mortar and bicycle companies (The German Army had 80 bicycle companies in 1915). However, the cavalry divisions still lacked artillery. Still, with additional infantry the cavalry became more capable of taking and holding ground. As the Russian roads were generally not suitable for bicycles the additional infantry attached to the cavalry divisions in the Kurland operation were provided with light Russian wagons to move the troops quickly.

Cavalry Tactics of 1915.

The cavalry was armed with carbines, sabers and lances and served as a tactical reconnaissance force while the operational and strategic reconnaissance missions were taken over by the airplane. In prewar maneuvers the cavalry and aircraft had practiced coordinating their efforts and the result was that, when the war came, the two reconnaissance arms were highly effective in providing accurate information on the location and movements of enemy forces.¹⁸ For the German cavalry flank protection and support for infantry were vital missions. The cavalry lacked the firepower to take on infantry units, so cavalry was used operationally to get around Russian defenses and threaten the Russian infantry from the rear. Cavalry also served as a screening force to keep Russian cavalry away and as a blocking force to seize or cut key points, but these forces had limited power to hold a position unless supported by infantry. Raiding enemy railroad lines and disrupting enemy logistics was a major mission of both the German and Russian cavalry and the fluid operations in the East offered some considerable opportunities for this. Cavalry was a highly mobile force and in the fluid operations of April-May 1915 in Kurland the Germans made advances of greater than 50 km per day in the opening days of the campaign.¹⁹

April 1915 Gruppe Lauenstein Created in E. Prussia

The German 10th Tenth Army that had routed the Russians in the battle of the Masurian Lakes in February was largely stripped of its infantry division strength to support the German/Austrian offensive in Galicia. Thus, any operation in Kurland in the spring and summer of 1915 was to be

a true ‘economy of force’ operation with German forces in the northernmost sector of the front allowed only very limited firepower and logistics support. For the Kurland campaign Gruppe Lauenstein, a corps strength force, was created. The Gruppe Lauenstein commanded Cavalry Corps I with the 3rd Cavalry Division and the Bavarian Cavalry Division, and the 8th Reserve Division. Based at Memel Gruppe Lauenstein had the 6th Cavalry Division and the 6th Reserve Division as well as an array of Landsturm units from East. Prussia. The main weight of offensive was to be on the southern flank of Kurland to threaten Kaunas. The Chief of Staff von Falkenheyn focused the German Eastern efforts on the offensive in Galicia and approved only limited efforts on other sectors of the Eastern Front.²⁰

But Ober Ost had its own agenda and after Tannenberg and the Second Battle of the Masurian Lakes certainly had a lot of credibility. Hindenburg and Ludendorff wanted more troops for Eastern operations and resented that the 10th Army was stripped of some infantry divisions for the Gorlice operation. For his part, von Falkenheyn approved an advance on Libau only if no real Russian resistance was likely. Luckily, the German intelligence on the Russians was thorough, as it had been through the war in the East since Tannenberg. The Germans had two main advantages in the field of intelligence beyond having better trained and more capable staff officers: first of all, the Germans had an efficient and well-trained air service that throughout the campaign provided accurate information on Russian troop movements and activity behind the lines. Secondly, the Germans had an efficient signals intelligence service that routinely intercepted the Russian Army’s radio messages. The Russian messages must have been sent in the clear or had such simple codes that the Germans could easily break the messages and read the Russian commander’s mail. The battle reports of the Masurian Lake campaign in early 1915 noted several important moments in the campaign in which the Germans learned of the Russian plans by signals intercepts.²¹ From Tannenberg on the German Air Service performed well in the long range reconnaissance mission, also noting and following major Russian troop movements well behind the front in time for the Germans to react and counter the Russian moves.²²

These advantages of efficient signals intelligence and air reconnaissance were also key to the German success in the Kurland campaign. While the Russian Army was often unsure of what the Germans were doing (in the opening moves of the campaign the Stavka believed that the advance

into Kurland was nothing more than a large raid) the Germans were well informed of major Russian deployments and movements.

Comparing the Two Armies

The Germans could take considerable operational risks when operating against the more numerous Russians because they were sure that—man for man – they were a much better army. In this their assessment was quite correct. The Russian Army that went to war in August 1914 was fairly well equipped, but training and leadership were only adequate. The German officer corps was better trained and educated, the German general staff officers were much better at planning and logistics than their Russian counterparts, and the German Army relied on its superb corps of professional NCOs to maintain unit combat effectiveness even in the toughest fighting. While there were many talented Russian officers, which is proven by the rise of generals like Brusilov and Kornilov during the war, the general pool of competent leaders was very thin in Russia compared to Germany. Moreover, the heavy losses of troops and especially of experienced officers in the early battles of the war, especially at Tannenberg and the Masuran Lakes, meant that the new replacement officers and soldiers arrived at the front poorly trained and prepared for combat. This was in contrast to the Germans who maintained a very effective system of officer and soldier training throughout the entire war.²³ Strong and well trained leadership also meant that the Germans could adapt more rapidly to new conditions at the front.

Coupled with the inherent weakness of leadership and soldier training the Russian Army of 1915 suffered from a severe lack of munitions and equipment. In early 1915 Russian artillery shell and munitions production was very low, and even rifles were in short supply. Some of the most basic equipment was lacking. For example, Russian artillery brigades had to manage with only one telephone for communications. While the Russians managed to increase munitions and equipment production in 1916, in 1915 the disparities between German and Russian equipment and munitions supply were enormous.²⁴ While the Russians could be tenacious in the defense and would carry out some well-handled divisional and brigade attacks in the Kurland campaign, the battles of Tannenberg and the Masuran Lakes had taught the German soldier that he could handle the Russians even on their home ground.

Initial Operations in Kurland

Gruppe Lauenstein would begin its offensive on 27 April, before the great German offensive in Galicia, so to divert the Russian Army's attention. It was based around a rapid cavalry advance and was expected to face little opposition as the Russians held Kurland mainly with cavalry forces and some poorly trained and equipped reserve units. The Ist Cavalry Corps would drive on Schaulen and Mitau- both key rail junctions and seize, or at least cut, those lines. The 6th Cavalry Division would strike toward Mitau (Lat. Jelgava), mainly as a raid since cavalry divisions had little ability to hold ground. With the exception of the force to take Libau moving north, most German forces would move due east from East Prussia or southeast so that the vital fortress city of Kaunas would be placed under threat.

For the Libau Operation a special task force was created under Gruppe Lauenstein and placed under the command of Colonel Graf von Schulenburg. Schulenburg's task force consisted of the 3rd Cavalry Brigade – two regiments with 1400 men, an Infantry Regiment from 6th Reserve Division, two East Prussia Landsturm battalions, one Landsturm cavalry squadron from Königsberg, 230 dismounted cavalry soldiers from the 13th Hussars, Reserve Pioneer Battalion 34, one pioneer company from the 6th Reserve Division, Mortar Detachment 107 (medium mortars), a machine gun detachment, a pioneer siege train detachment, eight light artillery batteries, three heavy artillery batteries. The grand total of forces was 9 cavalry squadrons, 5 infantry battalions with 8,000-9,000 men. Their mission was to strike north from Memel and capture the Russian fortress port of Libau.²⁵

The Russians and the Fortress Policy

In the 1890s Libau was built up as a main forward base for the Russian Baltic Fleet. Libau had highly defensible terrain, with swamps and lakes protecting it on the south and eastern sides, the sea to the west, and only the northern flank of the city offering an easy approach. The south and east of the city offered only limited areas of dry ground for an attacking force. The Russians built large fortresses to cover the land approaches and emplaced coastal artillery batteries to protect from a sea attack.

The fortress construction at Libau was part of a grand scheme of the Russian Empire from the 1890s to World War One to build a series of large fortresses to protect key cities. These fortresses were manned with large forces and thousands of heavy artillery pieces and were stocked with

munitions and supplies to withstand a long siege. Kaunas and Warsaw were also protected by a ring of large fortresses.²⁶

Unfortunately for the Russians, this vastly expensive program turned into a trap for the Russian forces once the war began. True, they had the potential to delay the Germans and force the Germans to undertake a large scale siege, but on the other hand, the Germans could easily bypass the fortresses and cut them off. In the end, rather than lose large numbers of fortress troops to a German siege, the Russians abandoned these vastly expensive fortifications. In the case of Libau, as with other fortresses, the forts were built mostly with older masonry techniques that would not have stood up to German siege guns. In short, the Libau fortresses in particular were obsolete even before they were built.

Advance on Libau

The German intent was to take Libau quickly and by surprise. The great German advantage here, and in all phases of the campaign into Kurland, was excellent intelligence on the Russian forces and movements. The German aerial reconnaissance squadrons at the front were highly efficient and were able to monitor the state of the Russian forces in the Libau area, and also spot any Russian movement to and from the city. In addition, because the Germans army air units were mostly concentrated to support the 11th Army offensive in Galicia, the German Navy provided its reconnaissance seaplanes to support the army throughout the operations in April to June in Kurland. It was the naval aircraft that accurately reported relatively few Russian troops in the fortress and evidence that the Russians were evacuating the city rather than making a fight. The German Baltic Fleet also provided a light cruiser squadron to support the attack on the city (2nd class light cruisers with 105mm guns) and also torpedo boats.²⁷

When the German advance began on 27 April the first two prongs of the advance were to be Gruppe Schulenberg, which advanced on Libau from Memel, and the main force of Gruppe Lauenstein, which struck out from Tilsit (East Prussia at and the end of the German rail line) due west to Schaulen to seize the key rail junction. Taking Schaulen would restrict any movement of Russian reinforcements in the northwestern front and would make it impossible for the Russians to quickly move troops to Libau by rail. The major forces struck west on 27 April meeting no

Russians on the first day and advancing more than 70 kilometers in the first two days. The force to attack Libau moved north from Memel on 2 May.²⁸

Gruppe Schulenburg advanced on two roads north to Libau. The southern road along the coast (still extant today) included the Landsturm battalions and a machine gun detachment and a few light artillery pieces. The main force of the Gruppe Schaulenberg would advance to the northeast and approach the city from the east. Between 2 and 4 May the advancing Germans saw a few Russian cavalry patrols but there was no combat. On 4 May the Germans took the village of Grobina, which controlled the eastern approach to the city.

As the Germans approached from the south a Navy torpedo boat landed a liaison officer to work with the Landsturm force and via light signals to the cruisers just offshore. The warships would provide fire support for the attack on Libau's fortifications. Meanwhile, navy aircraft maintained constant surveillance of the situation. On 5 May Libau was fully cut off and on 6 May the Germans brought their heavy guns up to Grobina to bombard Libau. On 7 May the German army began shelling the city and its forts with support from by the Baltic Fleet's light cruisers.

The Battle for Libau

The German cavalry units deployed north of the city to cut off any Russian retreat. On 6 May the Germans fought one skirmish with 40-50 Russian cavalymen, but there were no signs the Russians were either evacuating or reinforcing. The Russian coastal defenses fired at German air reconnaissance as the German Baltic Fleet deployed near the city and minesweepers were fired on by a coastal battery. On the 6th the German air reconnaissance reported that the Russians were leaving their fortifications and were demolishing fortifications on the eastern side of the city. The German commander deployed the 9th Uhlán Regiment to block any Russian evacuation by the northern road, the last possible Russian escape route from the city.

On May 7 the main attack on Libau began with naval gunfire support as well as the army artillery pounding the Russian forts. The German Navy sent cruisers in close to shore to bombard the Russian forts guarding the southern approach to the city. On 7 May the Landsturm units stormed one Russian fort on the southern edge of the city with little loss. North of Libau the 9th Hussars noted little activity—some trenches were dug on Northwest of the city but were weakly defended. On 7 May Colonel Schulenburg ordered navy and army artillery fire to begin at 1600 with a

heavy barrage for 15 minutes on the eastern forts—then he allowed a pause to ask for the Russian surrender. The barrage began and there was no surrender, so the Navy and Army fired on the coastal defenses and the main forts to prepare for a major assault the next day. By 1800 fires were reported in several places in the city. The Germans broke off their fire in the evening of 7 May and prepared to resume the ground attack the next day. To the north the 9th Hussars patrolled the northern side of the Libau defenses and saw only woods and swamps and a few small Russian cavalry detachments that were not inclined to fight.

On the morning of 8 May, with the German Landsturm successfully advancing into the city after taking the southern fortress, the Russians surrendered the city before the German main force could mount its assault. The small force of naval personnel and reservists manning the forts and garrison had never intended to seriously fight for the city and the Germans captured 1600 POWs with 12 artillery pieces and 4 machine guns. Along with the excellent naval port, the Germans captured vital raw materials including a large stockpile of zinc. One of Russia's largest barbed wire factories also fell into German hands. The total German loss in the operation to take Libau was 23 men. In short, this was a highly successful operation and more impressive when one considers that a large part of the German force were second and even third line reserve forces – namely the East Prussia Landsturm.²⁹

Strategic View

The Russian army was taken completely by surprise by Germany's offensive in the north and the attack was initially dismissed by the Stavka as just a large raid. But as Libau fell and Germans seized the rail junction at Schaulen the Russians took the German offensive very seriously indeed and rushed reinforcements to the sector. The first units the Russians had available were second line reserves and fortress troops from the interior of Russia, but soon an army corps was sent to Riga and additional cavalry units sent to the Kurland front. Soldiers from the Russian 10th, 12th and 1st Armies were all detached and rushed to the Kurland front. By the latter part of May the Russian forces amounted to 5 infantry divisions and 7 and a half cavalry divisions.³⁰ In early June the Russians feared for the loss of Riga and transferred the 12th and 13 Siberian Divisions from the battleground in Galicia to the north to stem the German threat. General Plehve took command of the newly created 5th Army (with four corps and six cavalry divisions) headquartered in Mitau (Jelgava) which controlled all the Russian forces from the Baltic Sea to

the junction of the Dubissa and Nieman Rivers.³¹ Thus, the German High Command's goal to divert Russian forces away from the German 11th Army's front succeeded brilliantly. In late May and early June the Russians outnumbered the Germans on the northern sector of the front.³²

After Libau Fell the Germans held a thin line western Kurland from north of Libau to Mitau (Jelgava) and Schaulen to the Niemen River north of Kaunas. The Russians reinforcements retook Schaulen, which would see heavy fighting for several weeks. Because the Germans intended to threaten Kaunas the main weight of the German forces was in the south, where the Russians rushed most of their reinforcements. To the north of Schaulen the front was only thinly manned and covered by cavalry patrols. The lightly manned front allowed the Russian cavalry to raid into the rear of the German lines to attack German logistics. On 18-19 June a Russian cavalry force was able to slip through the German lines and attack a transport column at Slady.³³ The Russians used their cavalry aggressively to probe and penetrate the Germans lines and caused the Germans considerable trouble.³⁴ The Germans also used their cavalry for raids.³⁵ At Mitau (Jelgava) the German cavalry force sent to raid the important rail junction failed to take the town as a hastily organized battalion of Latvian fortress troops from Riga mounted an effective defense. The successful defense of Mitau by the Latvian soldiers gave an impetus for the Russians to organize the Latvian Rifles.

The Russians and Germans around Schaulen and along the Dubissa River to the south settled down into a relatively static war with the Germans on the defensive. The main mission of the German cavalry in these fluid operations was to support the infantry by working around the flanks of Russian defenses and threatening the Russian rear, thus forcing the Russians to retreat. From mid-May to mid-June the thin German forces in Kurland conducted a holding operation. After taking Libau the OHL became nervous and questioned whether the Kurland campaign was simply a drain on resources and doubted that Libau and the territory won in the first days of the advance could be defended if the Russians made a strong counter offensive once they had a significant numerical superiority of forces in the sector. The German focus remained on making sure the operation in Galicia had enough troops, so the OHL proposed stripping more troops from the northern sectors of the front.³⁶ However, Ober Ost countered with its own plan to advance on Kaunas, to threaten Warsaw, and then advance toward Riga.

The period from mid-May to mid-June saw constant skirmishing and small battles between German and Russian cavalry units. At this point neither side had enough infantry forces or firepower to initiate a major attack. In mid-May Ober Ost noted that the Russians were apparently evacuating the northern part of Kurland, a sensible move as the Russians were now being hard pressed in the southern part of the front. Still, the German High Command was concerned about Gruppe Lauenstein's forces. As they were spread so thin that they were highly vulnerable to a serious Russian attack. In late May the High Command considered abandoning Libau and falling back to Memel.³⁷ This led to a debate between the High Command and Ober Ost with Ober Ost convincing von Falkenheyn to release additional forces to the Kurland/Lithuania front to reinforce success, and to threaten the Russian forces fighting a desperate battle in Poland. In mid-June German reinforcements were approved to go to the Kurland front to support an offensive to begin mid-July. Gruppe Lauenstein was to be renamed the Niemen Army.³⁸ The new Niemen Army would consist of the original Gruppe Lauenstein (36th Reserve division, 78th Reserve Division, Troop Command Tilsit and assorted cavalry units) and Ist Cavalry Corps (3rd Cavalry Division, Bavarian Cavalry Division and 18th Cavalry Brigade). Gruppe Morgen (1st Reserve Division, 2nd and 6th Cavalry Divisions, 3rd Cavalry Brigade and assorted Landsturm and reserve units being formed into larger forces.³⁹ The Nieman Army would be approximately five infantry divisions and five cavalry divisions. The additional divisions were given the mission to clear the whole of Kurland. On 17 July the Germans began a major offensive and the northern and eastern half of Kurland fell within five days to the Germans with only nominal resistance. The next step was to attack Kaunas, which fell on 8 August. The Germans continued to press to the gates of Riga, taking Mitau and Schaulen and key rail junctions along the way. In September the front line stabilized from Riga to the south, with all Poland in German hands. The 1915 campaign had been a disaster for Russia with two million casualties, including 800,000 POWs, lost from May to September.⁴⁰

Comments on the Campaign

The Germans won the initiative in the Northwest with the Battle of the Masurian Lakes in February 1915 and kept the initiative through all of 1915 although they were outnumbered by the Russians. The Germans had the advantage in each phase of the 1915 operations because they were able to gain operational surprise at every step—at Gorlice, the Masurian Lakes, and in

Kurland. In each case the Germans were able to move rapidly and decisively while the Russians simply reacted to each German move without any overall concept of operations. The Russians had the advantage in manpower and also in rail transport, but failed to use these advantages. The Stavka's response was to rush reinforcements a division at a time to the front and never took the opportunity to amass a significant force to strike a strong blow against the Germans.

The war on the Eastern Front was dominated by the need to control the key rail centers. In contrast to the West, there were few railroads to cover the vast distances of the region, which made control of rail lines the operational and strategic objective for both sides. Neither army could sustain itself far from the rail lines and it is a wonder that the Germans, who had to supply forces as much as 100 KM from the railhead at Tilsit or the ports of Memel and Libau over bad roads, managed to keep their forces in the field supplied.

The campaign in Kurland illustrates the inherent weakness of the Russian Army of 1915 when facing the Germans. The Germans were better equipped, better trained, and the Germans staffs showed a tremendous talent for effective planning. The Russian Army had the numbers advantage, but that was all. Due to problems in the Russian war industry the Russians suffered from a severe shortage of rifles and artillery and ammunition in 1915. The new Russian divisions thrown into the fight were poorly trained and well-trained leaders were in short supply. The Stavka's performance was mediocre at best. Although the Germans were highly vulnerable the Russians never massed forces for an effective counterstrike and fed its reinforcements and new divisions into the battle in a piecemeal fashion.

At the tactical level the Russians could fight well and the German regimental histories of the campaign record many sharp fights that pushed the Germans back and which were supported by accurate artillery fire. However, the Germans still held a strong advantage at the tactical level as well. The most interesting feature of the campaign are the large cavalry forces involved. The large distances involved in the East made the 1915 a highly fluid and mobile campaign. The cavalry battles along the Kurland front were constant from May to July 1915 and the German cavalry clearly proved more capable than their Russian counterparts as they fought both mounted battles and dismounted as infantry. The cavalry operations of 1915 certainly deserve their own book.⁴¹

But perhaps the greatest operational advantage of the Germans was their excellent intelligence. Through the whole campaign the German signals intelligence and aerial reconnaissance units of the Air Service and German Navy air detachments performed admirably. All the large scale Russian movements were spotted well before they reached the front, which allowed the Germans to deploy forces to counter the Russians. The Russian Air Service does not seem to have performed efficiently in monitoring German movements.

The operation to take Libau was a well-coordinated naval and ground operation that shows that even in the early stages of the war the navy and army could plan and work together. The naval and ground cooperation culminated in the highly successful offensive to take the Estonian Islands in October 1917. The payoff of the operation was increased security for the German navy, the acquisition of an excellent advanced base, and the development of Libau into a major German logistics center for the Eastern Front.

The offensive into Kurland in the spring of 1915 was envisioned as a limited operation with very limited goals. But campaigns take on a life of their own and this limited diversionary operation turned into a major campaign that conquered a large part of the Russian territory and set the stage for later operations in this key theater.

¹ The key documents are in the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv Freiburg (cited as BA/MA Freiburg) and are BA/MA RH 61-1542, Oberarchivrat von Schäfer, Band VIII Oberbefehlshaber Ost, "Die Ereignisse bis Ende Juni", Dec. 1930. This study gives the strategic perspective of the Kurland campaign from the view of Ober Ost. A specific study was written on the offensive against Libau by the Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt and it is found in BA/MA RH 61-1379, "Der Handstreich auf Libau", circa 1930.

² For this campaign see Gen der Kavallerie Ludwig Freiherr von Gebsattel, *Das KB 1 Ulanen Regiment "Kaiser Wilhelm II Koenig von Preussen"*, (Augsburg: J.D. Himmer, 1924). See also Josef von Tannstein, *Übersicht über die Tätigkeit des K.B. I Schweren Reiter Regiments Prinz Carl von Bayern im Kriege 1914/18.* (1921)

³ The key war memoirs for this campaign are Major General Max Hoffmann, *War Diaries and other Papers*, Vols. 1 and 2 (1929) and Erich Ludendorff, *Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1918* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1919).

⁴ See Von Hoffmann, Vol. 1, diary entries May 30, June 16 1915.

⁵ On the Masuran Lakes Battles see BA/MA RH 61-1596, Kriegstagebuch (KTB) Ober Ost, 10 Armee. 1915. For a general account see Herman Kaiser, *Aus der Kriegsgeschichtliche Deutscher Divisionen und des Oberkommandos der 10 Armee, Erster Teil* (Hanau: Waisenhaus-Buchdruckerei, 1940). See also Erich Ludendorff, pp. 98-100.

⁶ For the best account of the Gorlice Campaign, and the whole campaign in the East in 1915 see Richard DiNardo, *Breakthrough: The Gorlice-Tarnow Campaign, 1915* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2010).

⁷ BA/MA 61-1542, OB Ost, "Die Ereignisse bis Ende Juni," pp. 7-8.

⁸ On East Prussia in the war and the damage to East Prussia see Heinrich Schulze-Dirschau, *Der Deutsche Osten* (Berg am See: Türmer Verlag, 1989) pp. 444-447 and Bruno Schumacher, *Geschichte Ost-und Westpreussens* (Würzburg: Holzner Verlag, 1977) chapter 26.

⁹ Hermann Stegemann, *Geschichte des Krieges, Band 2* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1917) pp. 134-135. See also BA/MA RH 61-1379, Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt, "Der Handstreich auf Libau" 1930, p. 2.

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- ¹⁰ Archivsrat von Wienskowski, Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt, “Die Flotte und Libau” in BA/MA RH 61-1542, June 1930.
- ¹¹ Von Hoffmann, Vol. 2, chapter 9.
- ¹² The order of battle of the German units in World War I is found in Edgar Graf von Matuschka, *Organisationsgeschichte des Heeres 1890-1918, Deutsche Militärgeschichte 1648-1939* (Munich: Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamt, Band 6, 1983). In 1914 a German cavalry regiment had 36 officers, 688 men, 769 horses and 19 wagons. A cavalry brigade consisted of two regiments. A cavalry division consisted of three cavalry brigades, an artillery battalion of 12 light guns, a machine gun company with six machine guns, an engineer platoon, a signals platoon and a supply column. Total strength of a cavalry division was about 5,000 men. An infantry division consisted of 4 infantry regiments organized into two brigades. Each infantry regiment had a strength of 3390 men. Divisions had artillery brigades with 72 guns as well as supporting engineer, signal and supply units.
- ¹³ General der Kavallerie M. von Poseck, *Der Aufklärungsdienst der Kavallerie* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1927) 11-14. A good overview of German cavalry operations in world War I is found in Erich-Günther Blau, *Die Operative Verwendung Der Deutschen Kavallerie im Weltkrieg 1914-18* (Munich: C.H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1934).
- ¹⁴ On the German cavalry arm in World War I see H. F. Schulz, *Die Preussischen Kavallerie-Regimenter 1913/1914* (Friedberg: Podzun-Pallas-Verlag, 1985). See also Eds. Egan and Krieger, *Die deutsche Kavallerie in Krieg und Frieden* (Karlsruhe: Schille, 1928)
- ¹⁵ A detailed account of 5th Cavalry Division operations in 1915 is found in the Kriegstagebuch of Kavallerie Korps Heydebreck in BA/MA Doc. PH 8/V/40 KTB 18.7 – 31.8 1915. It is a good picture of East Front cavalry fighting.
- ¹⁶ Kavallerie Korps order of 18.7. 1915 in BA/MA 8/V/40(a). On the cavalry operation on the Bug river battle see BA/MA PH 8/V/41. KTB 5th Kavallerie Division and Kavallerie Korps Heydebreck.
- ¹⁷ For a list of divisions and their battle and campaign record see Grosser Generalstab, *Die Schlachten und Gefechte des Grossen Krieges 1914-1918* (Berlin, 1919)
- ¹⁸ General Maximilian von Poseck, *Der Aufklärungsdienst der Kavallerie* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1927) pp. 81-83.
- ¹⁹ For a highly detailed picture of cavalry operations in this campaign see Maximilian von Poseck, *Die deutsche Kavallerie 1915 in Litauen und Kurland* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1924). Von Poseck also wrote about many of the small cavalry actions on the Eastern Front in *Der Aufklärungsdienst der Kavallerie*.
- ²⁰ BA/MA 61-1542, OB Ost, pp. 7-13.
- ²¹ On use of signals intelligence to get vital information about the Russian movements and plans see BA/MA RH 61-1595 KTB Ober Ost and 10th Armee, pp. 19, 52, 94. The KTB of Ober Ost repeatedly notes vital intelligence obtained through intercepts of Russian radio communications through the campaign in Kurland.
- ²² Ibid. the Ober Ost KTB notes several instances of aerial reconnaissance obtaining key operational information on Russian movements.
- ²³ On the general problems of training and equipment in the Russian Army see Timothy Dowling, *The Brusilov Offensive* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008). See esp. pp10-12.
- ²⁴ Ibid. pp. 5-8.
- ²⁵ See Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt, “Der Handstreich auf Libau” in BA/MA RH 61-1379.
- ²⁶ For good general histories of the Russian Army in World War I and a discussion of the prewar plans and budgets see Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914-1917* (London: Penguin Books, 1975). Stone notes that in 1908 Russia allocated the vast sum of 800 million rubles for a vast fortress program. In 1908 more than 700 million rubles were spent for fortress guns and 112 million rubles for other artillery. In 1914-15 the Russian Army was outclassed in field artillery by the Germans due to the policy of building fortresses. See chapter 1.
- ²⁷ On German naval air operations in support of the army at Libau see BA/MA RH 61-1379, pp. 4, 6, 7. On the naval liaison team that coordinated gunfire see p.8.
- ²⁸ The small Libau operations was carefully studied by the German Reichsarchiv after the war and accounts by the Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt are found in BA/MA RH 61-1541, “Die Eroberung Kurlands” (1930), and BA/MA RH 61-1542.
- ²⁹ This account of the Libau fight comes from the Reichsarchiv study “Der Handstreich auf Libau” 1930 in BA/MA RH 61-1379. This is the most detailed account of the Libau operation.
- ³⁰ General Alfred Knox, *With the Russian Army, 1914-1917* Vol. 1 (London, Hutchinson, 1921), p. 291. Knox provides considerable background on the Russian Army operations in 1915.
- ³¹ Ibid. p. 292, 296

³² For a good view of the Russian forces in the campaign in the north see Boris Khavkin, “Russland gegen Deutschland. Die Ostfront des Ersten Weltkrieges in den Jahren 1914 bis 1915” in Gerhard Gross ed., *Die Vergessene Front. Der Osten 1914/1915* (Paderborn: Schöningh Verlag, 2006) pp. 50-64.

³³ BA/MA RH 61-1541, “Die Eroberung Kurlands”, p. 8.

³⁴ Ibid p. 9

³⁵ Ibid p. 2

³⁶ BA/MA RH 61-1542 Ober Ost, p. 35

³⁷ Ibid. p. 35.

³⁸ Ibid pp. 33-37.

³⁹ BA/MA RH 61-1541, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁰ Michael Neiberg and David Jordan, *The Eastern Front 1914-1920* (London: Amber Books, 2011). See chapter 1.

⁴¹ On the German cavalry operations see General Maximilian von Poseck, *Die deutsche Kavallerie 1915 in Litauen und Kurland* and the regimental histories noted earlier.