

BATTLE of DOGGER BANK

The First Dreadnought Engagement

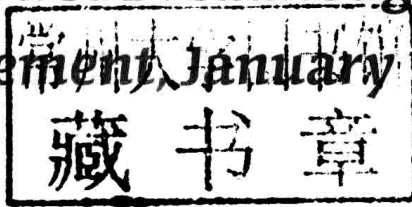
JANUARY 1915



TOBIAS R. PHILBIN

BATTLE of DOGGER BANK

**The First Dreadnought
Engagement, January 1915**



TOBIAS R. PHILBIN

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS *Bloomington & Indianapolis*

This book is a publication of

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Office of Scholarly Publishing
Herman B Wells Library 350
1320 East 10th Street
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 USA

iupress.indiana.edu

Telephone 800-842-6796

Fax 812-855-7931

© 2014 by Tobias Philbin

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The Association of American University Presses' Resolution on Permissions constitutes the only exception to this prohibition.

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of

the American National Standard for Information Sciences – Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1992.

*Manufactured in the
United States of America*

*Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Philbin, Tobias R.

Battle of Dogger Bank : the
first dreadnought engagement,
January 1915 / Tobias R. Philbin.
pages cm. – (Twentieth-century battles)
Includes bibliographical
references and index.

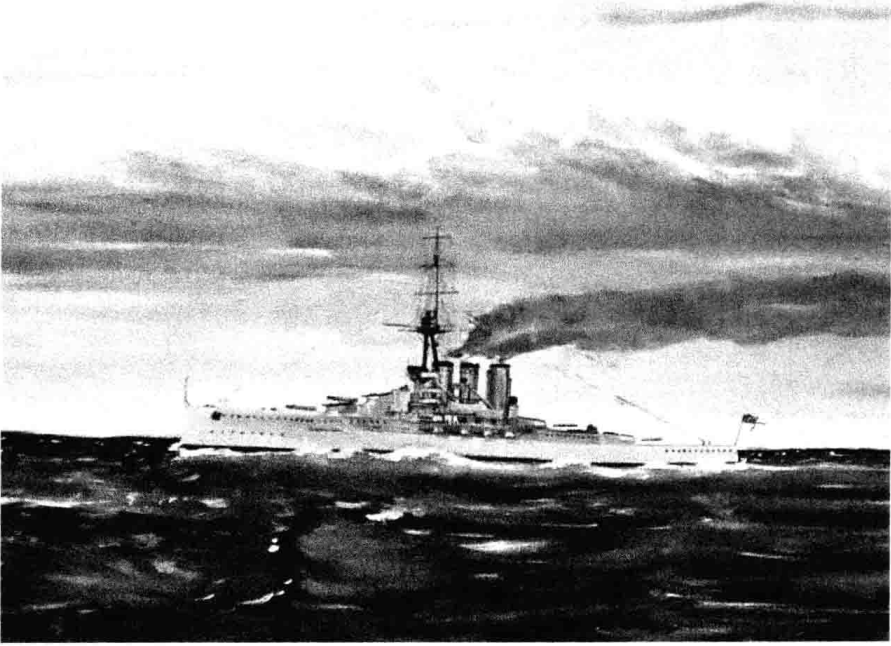
ISBN 978-0-253-01169-5 (cloth : alk.
paper) – ISBN 978-0-253-01173-2 (e-book)
1. Dogger Bank, Battle of the, 1915. 2.
Germany. Kriegsmarine – History – World
War, 1914–1918. 3. Great Britain.
Royal Navy – History – World
War, 1914–1918. I. Title.

D582.D6P55 2014
940.4'55 – dc23

2013038546

2 3 4 5 19 18 17 16 15 14

Battle of Dogger Bank



TWENTIETH-CENTURY BATTLES

Spencer C. Tucker, editor

*This book is dedicated to Bryan Ranft,
Professor Pater, educator, and scholar.*

What the country needs is the annihilation of the enemy.

Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson

Gaining military victory is not in itself
equivalent to gaining the object of war.

Captain B. H. Liddell Hart

Illustrations

- A.1 Map of strategic distances in the North Sea xv
- A.2 Capital ship construction (from Tirpitz, *German Appeasement Policy in the World War*) xx
- A.3 The battle cruiser “race”
(from Tirpitz, op. cit.) xxi
 - 1.1 SMS Mackensen 15
 - 2.1 *Invincible* 34
 - 2.2 *New Zealand* 35
 - 2.3 *Lion* 36
 - 2.4 *Tiger* 37
 - 2.5 *Blücher*, departing for the battle 38
 - 2.6 *Blücher*, sinking 38
 - 2.7 *Scharnhorst* and *Blücher* 39
 - 2.8 *Von der Tann* 43
 - 2.9 *Goeben* and *Moltke* 43
 - 2.10 *Seydlitz* 46
 - 2.11 *Derfflinger* 47
 - 5.1 German Strategic Overview of Operations
23–24 January 1915 118

- 5.2 German Chart of the Battle of the
Dogger Bank 119
- 5.3 Sketch of HMS *Lion*'s bridge 124
- 5.4 British Strategic Plan of the
Dogger Bank Action 126
- 5.5 British Official Chart of the Battle of
Dogger Bank 128

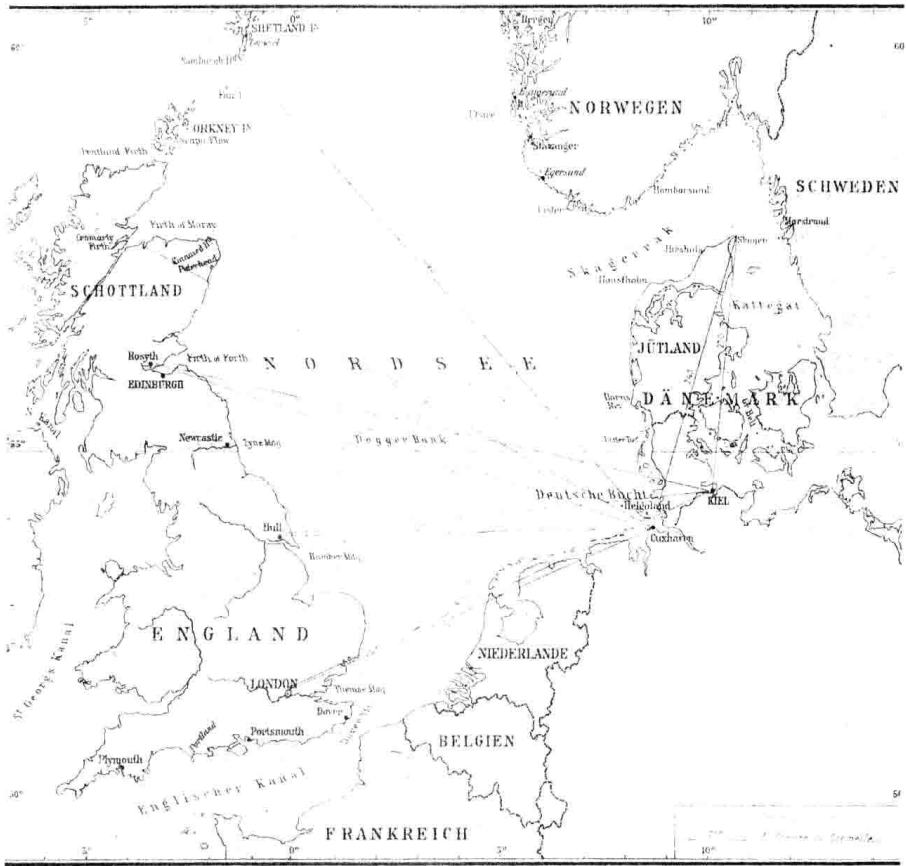
Preface

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED TO PROVIDE NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE first battle between the largest fighting machines of the early twentieth century. It seeks the reasons for the battle in the context of what was basically a stalemate on the ground in the opening phases of World War I. The ships involved were novel, powerful, and regarded as national assets that were not to be risked lightly, but which could be gambled in an attempt to even the odds for the battle fleets for which they scouted. The prestige and competence of Imperial Germany and the British Empire were at issue. Efforts of the previous twenty years and the investments of hundreds of millions in gold were at risk. Dogger Bank involved dozens of ships and it was a large, cold, and desperate battle, but it was both novel and a precedent for engagements to come.

It is instructive to understand the roles which time and distance played in the North Sea Theater. To this event, the Germans have left posterity with a remarkable little chart showing the distance in *Seemeilen*, or nautical miles (2,000 yards or 6,000 feet instead of 5,280 feet on land), between all the key points on the chart. This enables us to view the problems faced by the combatants both in time and distance. The North Sea is shallow and treacherous, providing a challenge to simple navigation, much less naval warfare. It is hostage to incredibly foul dangerous weather and low visibility which affected both combatants throughout the war. It is not possible or wise to ignore the role of the other half of the geography of the north German Coast – the Baltic. Germany faced the prospect of a naval campaign against Russia during the First World War. The subordination of the Russian navy, like the German, to the land

campaign, and the lack of coordination or imagination on their part for most of the war, despite Russia having significant resources, meant that the Germans did not have to concern themselves with Russian initiatives. They could resort to a purely defensive strategy, which retained Baltic sea-lanes for German use, especially support of German raw material imports for her war industries from Sweden, throughout the conflict. To a great extent however, the Germans were able to deter an active Russian fleet policy which might have contested control of the Baltic and opened the German North Sea coast to a Russian amphibious assault – Berlin was only ninety miles from the Baltic littoral. The Germans were able to do this because of the Kiel Canal, which would allow transfer of the High Seas Fleet from the North Sea to the Baltic, or the other direction, in a matter of a day. There was always danger from mines, and later from British submarines, but no British Baltic operation was ever attempted. The Baltic was always relevant to German sea power, as this map shows, but it was never operationally decisive, except to prolong Germany's ability to conduct the land war on two fronts and to deny victory to the Russians.

The map in figure A.1 illustrates some basic numbers. From the German main naval bases in the Jade River around Cuxhaven, the distances were: to Scapa Flow – 490 nm (the principal Grand Fleet base); to the Firth of Forth – 470 nm (the normal British Battle Cruiser Base, and sometimes the Grand Fleet locus); to Hull – 310 nm (and most targets on the British east coast); to the Thames – 340 nm; to Dover – 290 nm; to Portsmouth – 400 nm (main British naval base and repair facility). Distances of this magnitude, involving strategic operations either strictly naval or amphibious, would involve planning and logistics on scales unprecedented, but not impossible. The real issue was how to win the war and impose the will of either side by force. The British knew they would eventually win a war of distant blockade with little risk; but they could not know the cost in time or lives while the generals and politicians gambled on other fronts. Fisher and Churchill's Baltic ideas were not such chimeras as they have appeared. A battle which deprived the Germans of any significant portion of their fleet would alter the calculus for success or failure in the Baltic, thus potentially upsetting what was



A.1. Map of strategic distances in the North Sea as illustrated in the German Official History.

for the German army a front that, as long as it was guarded by the navy, contained no risk or threat, but for which there was no reserve or effective defense. The risks in the actions which resulted in Dogger Bank thus contained danger not heretofore obvious.

The first battle between dreadnoughts took place on 24 January 1915 in the southeastern North Sea. The Germans were frustrated because the British, who possessed what Clausewitzian strategists called “brutal superiority,” were supposed to attack.¹ Because of this mind-set, and the “vaunted British offensive spirit,” the Germans believed they would

attack. Instead, the war settled down into a series of feints and counter feints, in each of which the other sought to trap their antagonist and resolve the issue with a favorable outcome.

In his foreword to *The War Plans of the Great Powers*, Fritz Fischer advances the belief that the German body politic and its military leaders were essentially motivated by social Darwinist ideology to fight the First World War. The German army had to get the balance of German national resources because the army would determine the continued existence of Germany in the midst of a hostile Europe. Germany was surrounded by enemies. So, from about 1912 onward, the army was at the head of the line for resources, and the German navy had lower priority.

Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher had coincidentally realigned the British Empire to a regional power from a global power by the time of the outbreak of World War I. Tirpitz was the hammer who metamorphosed both the Royal Navy and the British Empire into a Eurocentric naval entity by forcing a consolidation of British naval strength in the North Sea, where the Battle of Dogger Bank occurred. That consolidation resulted from a confluence of economic and political circumstances which no war could actually have brought about. The rise of other powers, including Japan and United States, and the development of second echelon naval challenges in the Mediterranean, particularly Austria-Hungary and Italy, as well as others in South America, meant the Royal Navy had to neglect the rest of the world to focus on what was a serious threat to the center of gravity to her commerce – the home islands.

The High Seas Fleet, because it existed as a real and growing force, regardless of its actual numbers and its poor geographic situation, had already altered the balance of naval power forever from as early as the fulfillment of Tirpitz's first Navy Law in about 1908. Britain abandoned the two-power standard in 1911–1912, because she could focus only on Germany. The Royal Navy was designed and built to have 60 percent superiority over that country. In addition, the British army was being recapitalized to overcome the deficiencies revealed in the Boer War, and so it could support France in a conflict with Germany.

To some extent, Dogger Bank was an accidental battle in a war of miscalculation fought by a navy which was not really needed. But Dogger

Bank was fought as was its sequel Jutland. This engagement was documented by both sides as part of war propaganda efforts, as part of subsequent official histories, and then in both multi-volume analysis and in published papers on the British side. On the German side, it has been a subset of the larger Tirpitz/German sea power debates, some of which revolve around the Imperial German desire to achieve world power status. Most of the literature in the attached bibliography is at least 20 years old. There is no recent work on Dogger Bank per se rather several other works which contain examinations of the battle.² Of those, the most complete and comprehensive is the analysis by Gary Staff in *Battle on the Seven Seas*. This is full of both insight and flavor of what it felt like to live as a German admiral, officer, petty officer, or seaman in the full scope of German World War I cruiser battles. It is a complement from the German perspective to the Australian James Goldrick's *The King's Ships Were at Sea*, albeit 20 year later.³

Two principal decision makers with impact both on and off the battlefield were Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and his British opposite number Admiral Sir John Fisher. These two men reflected their nations and societies during two decades of the first modern arms race which culminated in the invention of the dreadnought type battleships, whose battle cruiser sisters comprised the principal combatants at Dogger Bank. The context here is social, economic, political, scientific, industrial and, of course, military. The social context is that of an evolving global system which contained the roots of conflict both vertically among classes and horizontally among nation states. Those roots comprised both fear and ambition on the part of every nation which eventually became involved in World War I. A common element was, of course, jingoistic nationalism reflected in both the press and middle classes of Britain and Germany, and used by Tirpitz as a lever to impose his vision of navalism on his own country, and by Fisher and Winston Churchill to manage the British response. The nature of the competition was at first political within Reichstag, *Kaisertum*,⁴ Parliament, and Empire. It then manifested itself in industrial products which harnessed the science of the day. Dogger Bank showcased the military and naval production of each side, which was the product of the "Anglo-German arms race before the First World War [which] was the most celebrated arms race in modern history."⁵ On

both sides, the ships and the navies evolved over time reflecting almost 16 years of industrial, strategic, and tactical decisions and experience, the results of which clashed on a cold January morning in 1915 in the North Sea. Although the tools of war evolved along relatively incremental lines as succeeding classes of battleships and battle cruisers were built, the argument can be made that the submarine, long thought too technologically immature for an impact on traditional naval operations, played a critical, even decisive role in this battle. It was in fact a submarine which did not exist, but the threat of it in Admiral Beatty's mind, which caused him to turn away from the Germans at a critical moment, and allowed them to escape. There was in fact no submarine, just what looked like a periscope wake in the midst of several hours of combat on that cold January morning.

As Lambert puts it, the British high command on the outbreak of World War I was so myopic as to fail to reconsider the fundamentals of their naval strategy, resulting in the Royal Navy going to war in 1914 "with an outdated strategic doctrine."⁶ However, there is new evidence that Churchill and the Admiralty, had they not been distracted by the war, were about to shift away from dreadnoughts to mine and torpedo carriers, which would be cheaper, leave the Germans in the "mud banks of the Elbe," with their dreadnoughts immobilized by the threat of underwater attack, and shift the larger British shipbuilding capacity to submarines by 1917. Whatever the outcome of that issue, it was true that, both before and after Dogger Bank, the British did not have to come to the Germans to enforce the distant blockade; the Germans absolutely did have to come to the British if they wished to break the blockade.⁷ This strategy would have threatened the rest of the world's dreadnought battle cruisers and battleships, and driven navies in a wholly different direction. Both the Japanese and the Americans were building dreadnoughts and the Japanese proceeded to build the four ship *Kongo* class, the first of which was built by Vickers. The *Kongo's* superior design drove improvements in the British battle cruiser *Tiger*, the newest ship at Dogger Bank.⁸ For their part, when the United States Navy (USN) discovered *Kongo* was to be one of four, which made the current armored cruisers of the Pacific Fleet obsolete, it began working on its own battle cruiser designs. But the USN did not consider the type worth building until

the Japanese decided to build battle cruisers. The early American battle cruisers would have resembled the USS *Wyoming* but would have had four 12-inch turrets on a very long hull, with battleship like protection and high speed.⁹ After the *Kongo* class appeared, U.S. designers and the General Board considered an enlarged *Kongo* class with 8–14 inch guns, a speed of 30 knots and armor on the scale of the *Nevada* class. In essence, these were high speed battleships, which was the eventual direction U.S. capital ship construction followed. The USN preferred to build battleships so if they found the enemy fleet or it found them, numbers and sheer power would tell the tale, at least for the period 1906–1915. There were additional designs, but worthy of note was the comparison of U.S. design philosophy to everybody else: “US Ships were not comparable to their foreign rivals, they had a far greater radius of action; displacement was calculated on an entirely different basis; the US armoring scheme was entirely different and far more extensive.”¹⁰

For the story of the battle itself, sources include the logs of almost all the ships and after action reports for Admiral Beatty and Admiral Hipper, as well as the papers in their respective admiralties. The construction details of the ships on both sides, including the compromises are also available. Eyewitness reports, prisoner interrogations, and war diaries are also available on both sides.¹¹ There is no ultimate consensus yet on the nature of the context – the fall of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism have severely undermined the left-wing model advanced by twentieth-century political scientists and historians. A recent review of the literature summarized the dialectic as less than determined or open to final interpretations.¹²

What has now begun to emerge is another interpretation of the context of the Battle of Dogger Bank. What we have come to understand about the First World War and its context is perhaps more about its tragic consequences than its actual chronology. Even the chronology bears more scrutiny, as this work shows. The truth is hard to find, particularly when it is buried in paper and enshrined in issue-based dialectical analysis of the last century. With an eye towards history, which he and his adherents have energetically embraced, Tirpitz provided a summary of the naval race in his work *Deutsche Ohnmachtspolitik im Weltkreis* [German Appeasement Policy in the World War]. His purpose was to document

Anhang 6

Schiffstabellen

Großkampflinienschiffe

Jahr	England	Größe t	Deutschland	Größe t
1905	1. Dreadnought 10:30.5 cm	18190		
1906	2. Bellerophon	18900	1. Nassau 12:28 cm	18600
	3. Superb	"	2. Westfalen	"
	4. Temeraire	"		
1907	5. St. Vincent	19560	3. Rheinland	"
	6. Collingwood	"	4. Posen	"
	7. Vanguard	"		
1908	8. Neptune	20220	5. Helgoland 12:30.5 cm	22400
			6. Ostfriesland	"
			7. Thüringen	"
1909	9. Colossus	20320	8. Oldenburg	"
	10. Hercules	"	9. Kaiser 10:30.5 cm	24310
	11. Orion 10:34.3 cm	22860	10. Friedrich der Große	"
	12. Conqueror	"		
	13. Monarch	"		
	14. Thunderer	"		
1910	15. King George V.	23370	11. Kaiserin	"
	16. Centurion	"	12. König Albert	"
	17. Ajax	"	13. Prinzregent Luitpold	"
	18. Audacious	"		
1911	19. Iron Duke	25400	14. König	25400
	20. Marlborough	"	15. Großer Kurfürst	"
	21. Benbow	"	16. Markgraf	"
	22. Emperor of India	"		
1912	23. Queen Elizabeth 8:38.1 cm	27500	17. Kronprinz	"
	24. Warspite	"		
	25. Valiant	"		
	26. Barham	"		
	27. Malaya	"		
1913	28. Resolution	29800	18. Bayern 8:38 cm	?
	29. Ramillies	"	19. Baden	?
	30. Revenge	"		

A.2. Appendix 6 to Grand Admiral von Tirpitz's *Deutsche Ohnmachtspolitik im Weltkrieg* [German Appeasement Policy in the World War]. This is a comparative table of British and German capital ships in the Naval Race.

A.3. The bottom of the capital ship comparison table, this time enumerating the battle cruisers of both sides.