Avoiding Tsushima: The Cause of the Naval Restraint During the First World War

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Never before had the world seen a build of naval arms such as the one that took place primarily between Britain and Germany in the decade leading up to the Great War. The ideas of Mahan prompted nations to build navies that were of considerable strength, and that meant the construction of battleships and cruisers, which could hurl heavier and more devastating rounds farther than any ships seen before. These vessels, collectively referred to as “dreadnoughts” after the revolutionary H.M.S. Dreadnought, were magnets that attracted admiration, and thus in the countries that possessed them these capital ships became symbols of national pride. To truly understand the race to build these dreadnoughts we must understand the ships that were being built. To do this we must understand the events that led to the revolution in the building of battleships and battle cruisers that was H.M.S. Dreadnought; this understanding is predicated upon knowledge of the battle experiences of the pre-dreadnought era. When one masters the dynamics of that process and the feelings surrounding these warships they also begin to comprehend the reasons that during World War I the opposing fleets that had been so painstakingly and competitively built saw decisive action only once if indeed the Battle of Jutland could be called decisive.

The pride that a navy gave to its people was unequalled in the years before the First World War. At no time was this more apparent than at the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. On Saturday 26 June 1897 there were assembled up river from Portsmouth ships representing fourteen navies from around the world. Twenty-two navies had been invited. So extensive was the number of ships that their lines, of which there were five, stretched for some thirty miles. The British contingent made up the vast majority of the display. It was composed of forty thousand men and three thousand naval guns. This massive fleet was brought together without bringing home any of the vessels that were assigned to foreign stations. The center of the display was the Channel Squadron. This consisted of the finest warships of the Royal Navy: the Royal Sovereign and the Majestic classes. These were the most powerful naval weapons of the day and were without equal in 1897. Of the vessels representing foreign navies those of Russia and America were of special interest. The Russians sent the largest ship that the country had ever produced. The Rossiya was 12,200 tons

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in displacement; her propulsion could be provided by either coal or oil and could power the large ship to nineteen knots. The American representative was the U.S.S. Brooklyn. The 9,200 ton armored cruiser was the queen of the United States Navy. The spectators that were primarily concerned with the appearance of a ship were not attracted to the high funnels, but of the foreign ships the Brooklyn was the most pleasant to the eye. Naval experts did not see unaesthetic funnels but clear vision for gunnery even under heavy steam. These experts also took special notice of the electronic shell hoists in the Brooklyn’s turrets, and the press went as far as to declare this ship from across the ocean was years ahead of the British in the area of technology. The effort of nations to send representatives shows the extent to which these countries would go in order to show their finest to their neighbors. The arms race was yet to begin, and this is apparent by the lack of effort that the Germans put into their representation. The S.M.S Konig Wilhelm was nearly three decades old, and was a great embarrassment at the Diamond Jubilee to her commander Rear Admiral Prince Henry of Prussia. He was sharply critical of the Reichstag for their opposition to the building of vital capital ships.

The era of pre-dreadnought warships was not to come to a close without these ships meeting each other in fleet action. In the Russo-Japanese War the fleets of Admirals Count Heihachiro Togo and Z. P. Rozhestvensky would meet at the Battle of Tsushima. This battle would be the best example that the leaders of navies in 1914 would have as to what a modern fleet action would resemble. The eyes of the people who determined the future of naval operations were upon the fleets at Tsushima. The fleet of Admiral Togo had been in home waters for some time before the battle; the fleet of Admiral Rozhestvensky had been sailing from its port in the Baltic Sea. The journey had begun poorly due to the unsteady nerves of an unprepared fleet. On 21 October 1904 the Baltic Fleet had an embarrassing incident that would set the stage for a disastrous campaign. The fleet had been steaming through the North Sea and was in the commercial fishing area of Dogger Bank when they sighted the mast of three fishing steamers. The crews were inexperienced and the crew of the Alexander, without orders from their commander, opened fire on the three commercial fishing steamers in what became the “Hull Fishing Boat Incident.”

The Baltic Fleet of the Russian Navy had sailed with the objective of first reaching Vladivostok before departing to seek an engagement with the fleet of Togo. A Russian commander commented upon their prospects should the fleet reach safe harbor. “They’ll have to wait for our second coming, out of Vladivostok! That’ll be a different tale. My! what a stew they must be in! What fun!” History would unfold differently. Togo’s ships stumbled upon the unfor-
tunate Russian fleet, but Russian spirits remained unrealistically high. The state-
ment made by Captain Semenoff can summarize the mood upon the Suvorov and
likely the Russian fleet as a whole. “Now the fun will begin.”

There would be nothing “fun” about the Russian experience under the
sights of Japanese guns at the Battle of Tsushima. The Russian fleet was convinc-
ingly beaten. The account of Semenoff becomes difficult to follow on a tactical
basis, for the Suvorov became so badly damaged that she fell out of the line and all
aboard became primarily concerned with the defense and survival of the ship and
not the conduct of the entire Russian fleet. His account is still useful as an
insight into Japanese efficiency.

The large shells of Togo’s fleet were called “portmanteaus.” They were
twelve-inch shells that were four feet in length, and their explosion was instanta-
neous and forceful. Semenoff described the strange nature of these shells this way:

The first shells flew over us. At this range some of the long ones turned
a complete somersault, and could clearly be seen with the naked eye
curving like so many sticks thrown in the air. They flew over us, mak-
ing a sort of wail, different to the ordinary roar….But what struck me
most was that these “portmanteaus,” curving awkwardly head over heels
through the air and falling anyhow on the water, exploding the moment
they touched its surface. This had never happened before.

The naval analysis presented in the introduction of Semenoff’s work concluded:
This shows that some of the Japanese 12-inch guns – numbering only
sixteen – were so much worn as to be unable to give adequate rotation
to their projectiles, which consequently could only have hit the Russian
ships by accident.

From this account of the battle seen from the decks of a floating wreck we can
deduce some valuable insight into aspects of the battle like the efficiency of
medium and small caliber Japanese gunnery. Semenoff recalls the Japanese fire
thus:

…I, in all seriousness, had intended in the present engagement to note
the times and places where we were hit, as well as the damage done.
But how could I make detailed notes when it seemed impossible even to
count the number of projectiles striking us? I had not only never wit-
nessed such a fire before, but I had never imagined anything like it.
Shells seemed to be pouring upon us incessantly, one after another.

This was different from the average performance of Japanese guns on the 10th
of August. In the time between the two engagements Togo’s fleet had been under a
heavy schedule of gunnery training. This was much to the dismay of Captain
Semenoff’s comrades.
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For the purposes of this paper the particulars of the Battle of Tsushima are not as important as the Anglo-German interpretations thereof. To get a brief glimpse of the way in which the battle progresses one can look at the casualties. The Japanese lost one hundred thirteen men, had one hundred thirty-nine critically wounded, two hundred forty-three seriously wounded, and forty-two slightly wounded. The Russian suffering was much of what Semenoff had to write about as the Suvorov sat helplessly adrift. “Occasionally a man fell wounded, and either got up and walked or crawled to the ladder leading below. No attention was paid to him – What mattered it? one more, one less!” Semenoff laments the carnage further:

The mess deck was full of wounded. They were standing, sitting, lying – some on mattresses put ready beforehand – some on the hastily spread tarpaulins – some on stretchers – some just anyhow…It seemed as if a cry, motionless, voiceless, but intelligible, a cry which reached to one’s very soul, a request for help, for a miracle, for relief from suffering – though at the price of a speedy death – rose up on all sides. A footnote from the above passage states that the wounded on the full mess deck probably outnumbered the total from the entire Japanese fleet.

The perceptions from the Battle of Tsushima can be seen in the prefaces to Semenoff’s Battle of Tsushima. They were written in the period between the battle and the revolution of shipbuilding in H.M.S. Dreadnought. The writers still held on to the illusion, as it would prove to be, that the lessons of Tsushima were applicable, so they provide a unique viewpoint. From these prefaces it is clear that the dominant thought was that the big 12-inch guns did not make the deciding difference in the battle. The Russians had twenty-eight more guns of the 9-inch and greater variety than the Japanese, and as stated above at least some of the Japanese 12-inch mains were not functioning correctly. On the other hand, the Japanese had a dominance of fifty guns of smaller diameters. To the observer of 1905 the weapons of greatest importance did not appear to be the big 12-inchers. Another factor that was perceived as a vital advantage for Togo was his fleet’s greater speed. It gave him the freedom to control the course of the battle. G.S. Clarke summed up the purpose of translating Semenoff’s chronicle:

What part did superior speed play in carrying destruction to the Russian fleet? What guns established the initial superiority of fire and wrought the havoc, moral and material, which ensured victory? What purpose did armour serve, and how did its distribution conform to the needs of the battle? It is upon the answers to such questions as these that our naval policy must depend.

In the prefaces to Captain Semenoff’s account The Battle of Tsushima there can
be seen the conclusions and intentions of two British naval minds on the lessons of the battle eight years before the First World War began. Clarke wrote, “Underlying the experience of the Battle of Tsu-shima there are undoubtedly principles of general application. It is for us to ascertain those principles, and to apply them as a test to all ship designs and tactical theories.”16

As the Russian blunder at Dogger Bank was under way the man who would, if indeed you could credit it to one man, make the lessons of the battle the Russians were steaming to fight obsolete was beginning his time at the Admiralty in England. John Fisher was a dedicated worker who understood the advancing nature of naval warfare. He pushed for more men and more money to be directed towards use by the Royal Navy. He was a man of singular vision. Robert K. Massie quoted John Fisher in Dreadnought: “…we must have no tinkering! No pandering to sentiment! No regard for susceptibilities! No pity for anyone! We must be ruthless, relentless, and remorseless! And we must therefore have the Scheme! The whole Scheme! And nothing but the Scheme!!!”17

Fisher proposed many reforms, and none of them were easy for the traditional naval minds of the age to come to terms with. The most difficult for the existing school of thought to understand was Fisher’s proposal for a new, fast, all-big-gun battleship. The idea would become the H.M.S. Dreadnought. The result of these developments was a ship that could do two things to any other capital ship on the sea: Dreadnought could fire farther and she could go faster. This meant that the commander of Dreadnought could hit a ship while outside of the range of its guns, and with the ship’s speed he could maintain that perfect distance. Any opponent would be helpless. At first glance the Dreadnought was good for the dominance of the Royal Navy, but the truth is located beyond that first layer. Dreadnought rendered every other battleship obsolete. She was a match for two or maybe even three of the ships that preceded her. Nobody, therefore, had more obsolete vessels that Britain. When all other ships became obsolete it meant that Britain only had one more battleship than any other nation, so it would be easier for rivals to approach the strength of the Royal Navy. In the arms race that ensued, Germany’s threat to do just that would add stress to Anglo-German relations. This competition in shipbuilding was the factor that prompted the talks concerning the naval build up that took place between Britain and Germany in 1906 and 1907. Naval power was a great source of international contention due to German fear that the British intended to use their powerful navy to control the channel and invade Germany. Lloyd George reminded the Germans what Bismarck had proposed concerning the thought of a British invasion. Bismarck proposed that the police could just go and arrest them. On the other side of the channel the English were determined

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not to let anyone surpass them in naval power. Their nation depended on it and Germany would only increase diplomatic tension by continuing the build at an intense rate. As these new Dreadnought battleships slid into the waters of the world the relationships between countries and the relevance of the lessons from Tsushima faded into uncertainty.\(^\text{18}\) Everything had changed.

When Admiral Sir John Jellicoe looked out across the North Sea he had no example that could give him a glimpse into the battle that he, and especially his subordinate Vice Admiral Sir David Beatty, hoped to force with the German High Seas Fleet. From the opposite shore Admiral Reinhard Scheer and his more aggressive battle cruiser commander Admiral Franz von Hipper faced the same uncertainty. Two similar admiralties could but guess as to what the engagement they sought would reveal. The weapons were undoubtedly powerful, but they were new and the tactics concerning their use were untested in mass action and unrefined even in isolated combat scenarios.

The more warrior-hearted men on both sides sought action, but to the men who found themselves in command, and thus in positions for blame should disaster befall their fleets, there arose a cautious demeanor. It would be inaccurate to state that Admirals did not want to fight, but battles would no longer be entered into unadvisedly. No more would there be courageous Jervis-like commanders leading an inferior force into a battle that could have been avoided. The High Seas Fleet steamed in hopes of isolating a portion of the Royal Navy, and the Royal Navy waited in port for indications of Scheer or Hipper leaving. Out of this pattern came the great clash of the Dreadnoughts.

Admiral Jellicoe held to a doctrine that maintained the status quo. If the Royal Navy could continue the blockade Germany would lose without a confrontation at sea. Scheer had no intention of doing nothing. He planned to carve away slowly at the British margin of superiority through the use of submarines and small scale engagements.\(^\text{19}\) As in the Battle of Tsushima the particulars of the Battle of Jutland or Skagerrak are not necessary for the purpose of this paper. Here the concern lies more with the attitudes that the battle created. As the fleets steamed into their home bases the leaders in England and Germany were able to feel the sting resulting from the loss of capital ships. Jellicoe had lost three battle cruisers (Queen Mary, Indefatigable, and Invincible), three armoured cruisers (Warrior, Defense, and Black Prince), one light cruiser (Tipperary), and seven destroyers. This meant the loss of 6,097 officers and men and totaled 8.84% of the Royal Navy’s total strength. Scheer had lost one battleship (Pommern), one battle cruiser (Lützow), four light cruisers (Elbing, Wiesbaden, Rostock, and Frauenlob), and four torpedo boats. This composed 6.79% of the strength of the High Seas Fleet. 2,551 German officers and men died at Jutland.\(^\text{20}\) These num-

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**Citations**
bers are inconclusive. The Germans had achieved an amazing tactical victory. With fewer ships they had inflicted greater casualties on the enemy, but a haze covers the victory of Jutland. When all was said and done nothing had changed. England still controlled the seas. Jellicoe informed the admiralty in the evening after his return to Scapa Flow from the battle that the fleet could return to sea for action on four hours’ notice. A New York City newspaper wrote, “The German fleet has assaulted its jailor, but it is still in jail.” Jellicoe had seen how quickly his fleet could be lost, and Scheer would have known that his fleet had only escaped due to the skill and luck of Admiral Hipper’s “death charge” and precise course reversals. Both fleets were thus in jail. The bars of the cells at Scapa Flow, Rosyth, and Wilhelmshaven were forged with the iron from the lost Russian fleet of Tsushima.

After all of the effort place upon the building of the powerful ships that were to rule the seas in the twentieth century why were the two great fleets placed in each other’s sights only one time? Why did admiralties act on a reactionary basis? Why were brave-hearted admirals stricken with a caution that seemed to paralyze? The answer lies not in what they sought to do but rather what they sought to avoid. These men were warriors, and some, particularly Beatty and Hipper upheld the finest traditions of naval warfare. That being as it was even they had to consider what might happen should they fail. Especially the English had to avoid disaster, for if Jellicoe had fought just any battle that presented itself he could end up following in the steps of Rozhestvensky instead of those of Nelson. If that had happened the English nation would have had no defense. The Germans had to take great care to avoid failure as well. The blockade was effective against Germany, and this efficiency would only increase if the British had no threat from a German navy to dominate their attention. Both sides wanted to fight. John Fisher is quoted by Robert K. Massie in the opening pages to his book Castles of Steel: “All nations want peace, but they want a peace that suits them.” It could be said of the fleet commanders in the First World War that they all wanted a fight, but they all wanted a fight that suited them. The effect that the Battle of Tsushima had upon the naval minds that formed the operational doctrines of the Great War can be best summed up by a statement made by the Tsar on the eve of mobilization: “We do not want a second Tsushima.”
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