

The fleet, the prestige object of the German Empire at the bottom of the sea. The self-sinking of the German fleet on 21 June 1919 in Scapa Flow

The event

"Open sea valves - initiate self-sinking!" Admiral Ludwig von Reuter (1869-1943) gave this order by flag signal on 21 June 1919, at 10 a.m., when the 74 most modern warships in the German fleet sank in the waters off Scapa Flow/Orkney Islands to prevent the victors from seizing the ships. In an unclear situation regarding the expiry of the Allied ultimatum to accept the peace terms, von Reuter acted on his own initiative. Interned since November 1918, the ships and remaining crews were under British supervision. This fleet, the rise of the German Empire to naval power and the associated rivalry with Great Britain were two of the reasons that led to Britain's entry into the war in 1914. While the Kaiser's pride sank to the bottom of the sea, the British watch crews opened fire on the German sailors in their lifeboats: One officer and seven sailors died as a result. Technically, the operation was unspectacular, as the later Admiral Ruge reported:

*"[...] the technical staff opened the valves and the condenser covers and smashed the predetermined pipework. The sailors put up the battle flag, commander's pennant and standard Z; then they opened the cargo covers, chamber doors and portholes, rendered the anchor capstan unusable and threw all tools overboard that could be used to detach it from the buoy. Just in case, they launched the life rafts in addition to the cutter. Once they had finished their work, they packed their things and prepared to disembark."*¹

After the signal "*§11 confirm*" had been set on the Admiral's ship, the small cruiser Emden, at around 10:00 on 21 June, all ships hoisted the battle flag and set "Stander Z"², so that between 12:16 and 17:00 74 ships sank completely or lay aground without the British watch crews and ships being able to do anything about it.

¹ RUGE, Friedrich: Scapa Flow - The End of the German Fleet. Oldenburg 1969, p. 147.

For the eyewitnesses, a terrifying spectacle unfolded, which one observer described as follows: "*Suddenly, without any warning and almost simultaneously, these huge ships got list to starboard or port, some dipped head over heels, their sterns lifted, and like it skywards, others sank quite rapidly, leaving only their masts and funnels sticking out of the water, while oil and steam and air shot out of the openings with a terrible roar, and huge clouds of vapour rose from the ships' berths. A dull rumble and the snapping of the anchor chains intensified the noise, while the great bodies overtook each other at a dizzying pace and sank with horrible sucking and gurgling noises. With a long-drawn-out sigh, the proud ships disappeared [...]*" cited in KRAUSE, Andreas: Scapa Flow. The self-sinking of the Wilhelmine fleet. Berlin 1999, p. 301.

² Meaning: "Battle turn to starboard" refers to the main tactical movement of the German fleet in the Battle of the Skagerrak on 31 May 1916 and is interpreted synonymously as an order to attack.

During the past seven months, the greatly reduced crews of the ships, which consisted only of the technically necessary personnel, lived in uncertainty about their future fate and that of the ships. Although the fleet had only been handed over to the British as a "bargaining chip", it was considered a foregone conclusion among the victors that Germany would never get the ships back. The circumstances of the transfer already suggested this, as the ships were to be handed over disarmed and therefore defenceless. Admiral Beatty organised a humiliating ceremony in which the 50-kilometre-long German naval convoy had to march through a trellis line of the British fleet.

It is interesting to take a look at the circumstances of life on board the ships of the internment unit, which shows clear differences between the capital ships and the smaller units, such as the torpedo boats. For the latter, the report of the then Lieutenant Z.S. Ruge is again revealing, showing on the one hand how cramped and spartan life on board was - with no shore leave, poor rations³ and inadequate postal connections with home. On the other hand, it shows how the officers on these ships managed to maintain the morale of the crews and prevent revolutionary outbreaks or mutinies. This was always against the backdrop of civil war-like conflicts at home, such as the Munich Soviet Republic in the spring of 1919.

Added to this was the inadequate fuel supply, which made it difficult to heat the ships in the harsh climate of the Orkneys, and the sometimes heavy seas, which led to damage to the ships that could not be repaired.

The situation remained critical on the capital ships, as it was primarily these units that had started the mutinies in October 1918. A revolutionary mood prevailed on the naval flagship Friedrich der Große in particular, forcing Admiral von Reuter to plant his flag on the small cruiser Emden in March 1919, whose crew was considered reliable.⁴ It is almost surprising

³ RUGE, p. 92: *"The food came by steamer about every fortnight. The consumption rates were set somewhat higher for us than at home, but they were not lavish either. Theoretically, the daily ration of fresh meat was 140 g of bacon and sausage, just under 30 g of fat and butter, and 600 g of sugar, 20 g of bread. [...] These were all maximum rates, and they were not always achieved. [...] Only beetroot jam, pearl barley and dried vegetables were plentiful, which could be used as a dish as well as a tea-like drink or to extend pipe tobacco. Pearl barley, which was served three times a week, and turnip jam went very well together. They were an integral part of lunch. Optimists even tried to improve the flavour of the old matjes herring we used to get.*

⁴ RUGE, p. 101: *"... [A] veritable mutiny took place at Frederick the Great under the influence of the radical soldiers' council. First, the [soldiers'] council spent so much of the plentiful supplies of schnapps they had taken with them as a precaution that senseless drinking bouts ensued. Then a member of the soldiers' council deposed the commander and the officers. A red guard was formed with the declared aim of establishing a special republic of internment under the sovereignty of the supreme soldiers' council, according to the motto "all power to the*

that there were no casualties under these circumstances, but this was due not least to the prudent leadership of Admiral von Reuter, who did not hesitate to reprimand monarchist-minded officers by declaring that the monarchy was now a thing of the past.

Naval armament and naval war theory before 1914

The sinking of the fleet marked the end of the almost thirty-year period since Kaiser Wilhelm II's accession to the throne in 1888, when Germany was preparing to become a naval power. Enthusiasm for the navy is closely linked to the personality of Wilhelm II (1856-1941) and the work of his Grand Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz (1849-1930). Both favoured a battleship-based navy that would be capable of taking on Great Britain's fleet, which dominated the world's oceans. Tirpitz rejected other designs, such as a cruiser-based fleet, which would have been better suited to protecting German maritime trade. Although there were approaches worth considering, for example in France with the "Jeune École", as the intellectual debate on world trade, world power and naval armaments occupied a broad social space at the time anyway - see naval associations. The reception of the writings of the American admiral Alfred Tayer Mahan (1840-1914), in particular his work "The Influence of Seapower", is indicative of this. ⁵

It should be borne in mind that naval armaments were highly prized by all maritime powers at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries and the battleship became the technical icon of the era. The battleship was the culmination of all the technical achievements of a nation in that technology-enthusiastic age: ship, machine, weapons, technology, all engineering disciplines and natural sciences developed in shipbuilding (Titanic) and especially in the battleship. And this also applied to the traditional land powers of Germany and Austria-Hungary, as it did to all the great powers that maintained fleets to protect their maritime trade and secure their colonial possessions - and not least as a prestige factor.

The size of the ships and the calibre of the artillery grew every year, and in 1905 the British HMS Dreadnought marked a leap in quality that outclassed all existing warships and provided the canter to a new stage of naval exploration.

soldiers' councils". The better part of the occupation was suppressed by force. An officer who confronted a man he knew well was told: "We have to, otherwise we'll be beaten up".

⁵ MAHAN, Alfred T.: The Influence of Seapower upon History. Orig. 1890. p. viii: *"It seems demonstrable, therefore, that as commerce the engrossing and predominant interest of the world today, so, in consequence of its acquired expansion, oversea commerce, oversea political acquisition, and maritime commercial routes are now the primary objects of external policy among nations. The instrument for the maintenance of policy directed upon these objects is the navy of the several states."*

The fleet planners could not have known that in the First World War it was not the battle fleets that determined the naval warfare, but submarines with their torpedoes, sea mines and the British naval blockade, just as the image of war is subject to rapid changes in the course of wars today, as the emergence of the cheap small means of warfare "drone" proves.

It should not be overlooked that there was also criticism of the fleet in the German Empire, which focussed on the enormous costs and castigated the tying up of human and material resources that would be better spent on armaments.

The fleet in the First World War

"The fleet is falling asleep in port"⁶ This impression became increasingly prevalent over the course of the war, especially as far as the capital ships were concerned in the second phase of the naval war after the Battle of the Skagerrak on 31 May 1916. The battle was fought by submarines, naval zeppelins and seaplanes. This was because with the submarine warfare, which was initially waged according to the *Prisenordnung*, then "unrestricted", Germany countered the blockade with an effective but politically risky means of naval warfare.

The war began for the German fleet with a few sensational, but ultimately meaningless, successes, such as the breakthrough of the Mediterranean Division (Goeben / Breslau) to the Ottoman ally, the sinking of three British cruisers by U9, the almost adventurous cruiser war of the Emden in the Indian Ocean and the Pacific and finally the victory in the naval battle of Coronel off the coast of Chile (1 Nov. 1914). Although this victory of the East Asian cruiser squadron under Admiral Graf Spee (1861-1914) was only of a tactical nature, it marked the first defeat of British naval forces for centuries. Accordingly, the British Admiralty deployed a battlecruiser force that destroyed Count Spee's squadron off the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic on 8 December 1914.

Otherwise, German naval warfare was limited by the British naval blockade to the "wet triangle" of the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. In addition to the military effect, the blockade cut Germany off from world trade (raw materials), the world financial markets (war financing) and the international flow of information (submarine cables), which will not be considered further here, but whose effects can hardly be overestimated.

When deploying the fleet, the high command vacillated between the desire to fight a decisive battle and the concern of jeopardising the valuable ships in the process. Against this backdrop, the British Grand Fleet and the German High Seas Fleet met in the Skagerrak on 31 May

⁶ HUCK, Stephan / PIEKEN, Gorch / ROGG, Matthias (eds.): *Die Flotte schläft im Hafen ein - Kriegsalltag 1914-1918 in Matrosen Tagebüchern*. (Catalogue of the exhibition). Dresden 2014.

1916 and fought the last - and therefore largest - naval battle of the classic kind, in which two battle fleets met in battle formation for an artillery duel.⁷ The result: a battle without a clear winner, but with significantly higher British losses, meant that there were no further encounters between the fleets in the course of the war.

For the German High Seas Fleet, this meant staying in harbour and in the roadstead with deteriorating rations and morale, which was one of the reasons for the mutinies of 1918.

As a result, the investment in the battle fleet remained unprofitable for the German Empire, but it tied up resources that would have been better spent on armaments due to the construction of further capital ships (including Baden / Hindenburg). And so it is not without irony that the longest voyage of the modern battleships was to Scapa and the bottom of the sea in 1918.

Consequences and reactions

As a direct consequence of the sinking of the fleet, the victors tightened the terms of the Peace of Versailles and now demanded the return of the remaining modern ships of the young Imperial Navy, as well as large quantities of maritime equipment such as floating docks, harbour cranes, etc.

Although the Allies were superficially outraged by the withdrawal of the fleet, a differentiated picture emerges, as the question of the distribution of the fleet among the victors was controversial from the outset. It was no coincidence that Great Britain insisted on the internment of all ships in a British harbour in order to prevent third parties from gaining access to the modern German ships, which they were reluctant to see in the hands of their former allies, so as not to jeopardise British naval superiority once again. In particular, it was already dawning on the British Admiralty at this time that it would no longer be the Royal Navy but the US Navy that would dominate the seas, as is still the case today.

Officers and men of the internment unit remained in British "custody", i.e. they were transferred from internment to captivity, which was a dubious process from a legal point of view,

⁷ Victor KLEMPERER expresses his disappointment about the Battle of the Skagerrak in his diary: *"My triumph over the Skagerrak victory has not lasted. This victory is even more pointless than the victories on land. What does it decide? We have only a fifth of the English losses? But that weighs more heavily for us than for the English and the fivefold higher loss! We have the moral success? But the English will portray everything differently, and in fact the German fleet has obviously returned to its harbour just as exhausted as the English fleet. Yes, if one could push on, destroy, land, or if one could finally destroy the blockade, but only in the style of the Middle Ages, fight a battle for the sake of the knight's honour, after which both parties return home without anything essential having changed - it is an insane anachronism"*. Cited in KARSTEN, Arne / BADER, Olaf: Great naval battles - turning points in world history. Munich 2013, esp. pp. 325-347, here: S. 325.

as Admiral Ruge stated: *"Our legal situation was not clarified, and never has been. No prisoners of war can actually be taken during an armistice, and it is also unusual for prisoners to arrive with suitcases and other private property."*⁸ The Donington Hall camp remained the crews' destination until January 1920, when they were only allowed to leave after the formal entry into force of the Peace of Versailles on 10 January 1920. Their reception in Wilhelmshafen by the Commander-in-Chief of the Reich Navy, Admiral von Trotha, on 31 January 1920 was honourable and not ignominious. Just as the returning German Schutztruppe under General von Lettow-Vorbeck had entered Berlin almost triumphantly through the Brandenburg Gate in March 1919. This reveals certain ambivalences in the assessment of the end of the war and the defeat, which later led to the idea of the "army undefeated in the field".

The end point - and from the perspective of the time - the "avenging" conclusion of the Scapa Flow chapter is the operation by Lieutenant Captain Günther Prien on 14 October 1939, who penetrated the well-protected harbour of Scapa Flow with his boat "U47" and sank the battleship Royal Oak there. Accordingly, the regime used Prien's achievement to stylise him as the first "naval hero" of the Second World War.

What remains to be said is that the majority of the ships were raised between 1923 and 1939 in technically very complex procedures and then scrapped or scrapped, whereby the enormous material value guaranteed a high profit.

Reception

While the anniversary of the Battle of the Skagerrak (31 May) was regularly commemorated in the interwar period and in Hitler's Reich, the day of the self-sinking was denied such prominence, which can be attributed to the ambivalent classification of the event. For the most part, the act was seen as saving the honour of the German Navy, which avoided an ignominious surrender of the "undefeated" fleet to the enemy. Nevertheless, the event remained in a grey area, as ultimately only the sinking in battle could be considered honourable.

For the Kriegsmarine from 1933 onwards, the revolution tended to become the negative point of reference for a tradition that consisted of the German naval forces never again being allowed to cause a revolution, which may partly explain the naval leadership's particular loyalty to Hitler.

For the young German Navy, Scapa Flow is obviously little more than a date. While the frigate Brandenburg at least deployed to the Skagerrak and then to Scapa to commemorate the

⁸ RUGE, P. 159.

100th anniversary of the Battle of the Skagerrak in 2016 together with the British fleet, the fleet showed no presence with surface units at the celebrations on Orkney on 21 June 2019. Nevertheless, the German War Graves Commission was represented by a delegation at the cemetery in Lyness and at the ceremony at sea.

Literature:

Measured by the number of monographs, e.g. on the Battle of the Skagerrak, the Unrestricted Submarine, the battle of the East Asia Squadron or the fate of the small cruiser Emden, the internment and self-sinking of the fleet are more of a marginal topic in the naval history of the First World War.

The following selection therefore refers primarily to overview accounts. The report published 50 years after the event by the then lieutenant and later first inspector of the German navy, Admiral Prof. h.c. Friedrich Ruge (1894-1985), who was an officer on the torpedo boat B 110 and a member of the internment unit. Krause's 1999 study is exhaustive, knowledgeable and multi-faceted.

The facts about the sinking are largely known. However, the question of the extent to which the British guards were aware of the German preparations for the sinking and possibly even tacitly tolerated them in order to avoid having to settle the question of the ships' whereabouts with the allies is worthy of discussion.

1. DUPPLER, Jörg: Germania auf dem Meere. Hamburg 1989.
2. JENTZSCH, Christian / WITT, JANN: The naval war 1914-1918 - the Imperial Navy in the First World War. Darmstadt 2016, esp. pp. 163-178.
3. HUCK, Stephan / PIEKEN, Gorch / ROGG, Matthias (eds.): Die Flotte schläft im Hafen ein - Kriegsalltag 1914-1918 in Matrosen Tagebüchern. (Catalogue of the exhibition). Dresden 2014.
4. KARSTEN, Arne / BADER, Olaf: Great naval battles - turning points in world history. Munich 2013, esp. pp. 325-347.
5. KRAUSE, Andreas: Scapa Flow. The self-sinking of the Wilhelmine fleet. Berlin 1999.
6. MAHAN, Alfred T.: The Influence of Seapower upon History. Orig. 1890.
7. REUTER, Ludwig v.: Scapa Flow. Leipzig 1921.
8. RUGE, Friedrich: Scapa Flow - The End of the German Fleet. Oldenburg 1969.
9. SCHULZE-WEGNER, Guntram: Germany at sea. 150 years of German naval history. Hamburg 1998, esp. pp. 130-136.

Timetable:

Oct. 1918	Mutiny of naval units in Kiel as the starting point of the "November Revolution"
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11.11.1918	Armistice of Compiègne
19.11.1918	Start of the transfer voyage of the completely disarmed (ammunition, breech-blocks, rangefinder) ships.
27.11.1918	Arrival of the last units Only hull crews remain on the ships of the "internment association" in order to maintain the technical operation of the ships. Crews are supplied from Germany. No radio communication and sluggish mail traffic.
March 1919	Admiral von Reuter transfers from the liner "Friedrich der Große" to the small cruiser "Emden" due to the attitude of the Soldiers' Council
31.05.1919	Demonstrative commemoration of the Battle of the Skagerrak, including the forbidden hoisting of the battle flag
June 1919	Unclear situation regarding peace conditions
17.06.1919	Admiral von Reuter gives the order to prepare the self-disposal
18.06.1919	Further reduction in the number of staff in order to eliminate any "unreliable" personnel.
21.06.1919	from approx. 10:00 a.m.: Command by flag signal begins and is passed on. The order is " <i>Confirm §11</i> ". Ships hoist the battle flag and set "Stander Z" ⁹ . Between 12:16 and 17:00, 74 ships sink or are grounded. Nine German soldiers are shot dead by British guards. They rest in the cemetery in Lyness
28.06.1919	Peace Treaty of Versailles
	Crews of the internment organisation were taken to British prisoner-of-war camps.
31.01.1920	Reception of the returning crews in Wilhelmshaven
1923-1939	Most of the ships lifted and scrapped
14.10.1939	U 47 under Kapitänleutnant Prien sinks the battleship "Royal Oak" in the bay of Scapa Flow
21.06.2019	Commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the self-disposal under British direction with modest German participation. Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge represented by the Bremen regional association.

Links

Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Scapa, occupancy Lyness cemetery - German graves	https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/74567/lyness-royal-naval-cemetery/
Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Scapa, Remembrance 2019	https://www.cwgc.org/our-work/news/cwgc-hosts-scapa-flow-centenary-ceremony/
Naval Museum Wilhelmshaven	https://www.marinemuseum.de
Marinemuseum Wilhelmshaven: Scapa 2019 commemorative page	https://www.marinemuseum.de/we-will-remember-them/
Scapa Flow, Sunken Ships:	http://www.scapafloowrecks.comaflowwrecks.com

⁹ Meaning: "Battle turn to starboard" refers to the main tactical movement of the German fleet in the Battle of the Skagerrak on 31 May 1916 and is interpreted synonymously as an order to attack.

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2024 06 20 / 11:30h

Volksbund, article on Scapa and the death of the engineer Evertsberg	https://www.volksbund.de/en/nachrichten/letzte-gefallene-des-ersten-weltkriegs
Volksbund: Lyness cemetery	https://kriegsgraeberstaetten.volksbund.de/friedhof/lyness-naval

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