

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 87

“The Cossacks Are Coming!”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Russian Army was the largest in the world in 1914, and no component of the Imperial Russian military was more famous, or more feared, than its Cossack cavalry.

Beginning on August 2, the third day of Russian mobilization, Cossack cavalry units began crossing the border on reconnaissance raids into East Prussia, the rural region of Germany adjacent to the Russian Empire. Within days, wild rumors spread across Germany of East Prussian refugees fleeing westward in the tens of thousands to escape the advance of this dread enemy.

“*Kosaken kommen!*” the worried Germans told one another. “The Cossacks are coming!”

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 87. The Cossacks Are Coming!

Cossacks are a Slavic ethnic group native to certain regions of southern Russia, especially around the Black Sea. They are a colorful people, traditionally nomadic with a decentralized, democratic, and fiercely independent way of life.

They eventually were integrated into the Russian Empire, and by the Napoleonic Era, had a privileged relationship with the Empire under which they were permitted to retain their way of life, considerable autonomy from St. Petersburg, and tax-exempt status in return for which they provided the Russian Emperor with their unique cavalry units. As a result of this special arrangement, by the latter half of the 19th century, the Cossacks are among the Russian Emperor’s most enthusiastic supporters.

They also have a reputation across the Empire, and across Europe, as hardy and ferocious horsemen. At the risk of dumping some cold water on the romantic image of the bold and deadly Cossack, I have to point out that by 1914, the more conventional cavalry units of the Great Powers, including Russia’s, were better trained and equipped than the Cossacks, whose training and tactics had barely changed over the past two centuries. Because of this, the Russian Army had relegated its Cossack units to ceremonial roles, where their colorful traditions added some

excitement to the festivities. They were also useful for crowd control, and were often employed during the Revolution of 1905, as you may recall my mentioning. They readily broke up the demonstrations in St. Petersburg on Bloody Sunday and at other times and places. That was because their staunch loyalty to the Emperor and their lack of family and cultural ties to the city dwellers of Russia made them more reliable than regular soldiers, and also more willing to use force against civilians, which in turn burnished their reputation as uniquely dangerous foes.

When the Great War began, and as it became clear that an all-out assault on France was the cornerstone of the German strategy, Paris began sending increasingly urgent cables to St. Petersburg, which were delivered to the Imperial foreign ministry by an increasingly hysterical Maurice Paléologue, the French ambassador. And so the Russian First and Second Armies were ordered to be in position to begin their advance into Germany on August 13, or M-14, the fourteenth day of Russian mobilization, even though their supply lines would not be ready until M-20.

And because of this, the Cossacks were the first into East Prussia, sent as reconnaissance units to scout and test German defenses. This really didn't mean very much militarily, but because of the Cossacks' frightening reputation, terrifying rumors abounded. Almost from the first day of the war, the German commitment to throwing her entire army against France first, with only a minimal defense to hold back the Russians would be tested by recurring fears that the Russian Army might reach Berlin before the German Army reaches Paris.

In response to the French pleas for quick action, one measure the Russian military took to speed up mobilization was the prohibition on the sale of vodka. During the Russo-Japanese War, the mobilization schedule had been thrown out of whack by Russian soldiers' habit of showing up at the depot stinking drunk. And so the Emperor ordered a ban on the sale of vodka in certain regions during the mobilization period. This was easy enough to accomplish, since the Imperial state held a monopoly on the retail sale of vodka.

In fact, the prohibition seemed to be working out so well at first that on August 22, Emperor Nikolai extended it for the duration of the war. There were high hopes among temperance advocates that banning vodka would increase productivity when the nation needed it the most. What could go wrong? You know, apart from increasing political unrest in a country already close to revolution? Well, how about this: vodka sales accounted for a third of the Russian government's revenue. So, as Russia mobilizes the largest army ever seen in the entire military history of a planet that already has quite a lot of military history, thank you very much, one of her first acts will be to cut off a major source of revenue that could have been used to help keep that army fed and supplied. Oops.

The Russian Army had been undergoing extensive upgrading and modernization since the debacle of the Russo-Japanese War (episodes 31-36), and on paper, the Army looks pretty good. A standing force of 1,400,000 capable of mobilizing to a full strength of 5,000,000 on the

outbreak of war. The Russian Army had a pretty good infantry rifle, with a really formidable bayonet, but there are only three factories in all of Russia capable of manufacturing these rifles and the ammunition that goes inside them. The result will be that Russia will go to war with an army that has nowhere near enough rifles to arm all these soldiers, and the production of new rifles will not even be able to keep up with the demand for replacements, let alone reduce the overall shortage. The only good news here, if you want to call it good news, is that the rifle shortfall will eventually shrink, not because the Russian state will be producing more rifles, but because it will have fewer soldiers to equip.

Russia is also short on artillery pieces. The railroads have been much improved in the past decade, but there are still not enough of them to cover Russia's vastness. Motorcars and trucks might help ease Russia's transportation woes, but her army only has a few hundred of these. Telegraph wire and equipment was in short supply, which is going to hurt the Russian war effort quite a lot, as you are about to see. They had radios, but lacked trained signal corps personnel who could send and receive coded messages. Russia does have quite a lot of airplanes, though. Russian military leaders saw the value in the airplane sooner than most of their colleagues in other European countries, and so she will go to war with more military aircraft than Germany and Austria combined.

At the beginning of the war, the Emperor appointed the Grand Duke Nikolai commander-in-chief of the Russian Army, putting him in command of the largest army ever seen in history. The Grand Duke was the first cousin of the late Emperor Alexander III, making him the current Emperor Nikolai's first cousin once removed. And yes, they are both named Nikolai, and yes, it's going to be confusing. Inside the Romanov family, the Grand Duke was often referred to by the diminutive Nikolasha, which you can think of as "Little Nick" or "Nicky," I guess, to distinguish him from the Emperor.

The Grand Duke was, on the one hand, a career soldier who was popular in the Army, and, on the other hand, a Romanov, a member of the ruling family and therefore someone whose loyalty was above question. The Grand Duke is supposed to have played a role in persuading the Emperor to accept reform during the Revolution of 1905. The story goes that the Emperor sounded out the Grand Duke on the possibility of his taking command of the Army and using it to put down the unrest, and the Grand Duke responding by threatening to kill himself if he received such an order, and that was the end of that.

The Grand Duke was married to Anastasia, the daughter of King Nicola of Montenegro, whom you will remember from episode 79 as cultivating Lorraine thistles as a token of the day when that province would be returned to France. And just a week after that incident, here is her husband, now in full command of the Russian military, responsible for conducting the war against Germany, against Austria, and, soon enough, against the Ottoman Empire.

The thing is, that although the Grand Duke was by this time 57 years old, and had been in the army since he was 16, he had never actually seen combat. He had served in administrative and training roles, but was more a bureaucrat than a field officer. Since 1905, he had been commander of the St. Petersburg Military District, which is exactly where you'd expect the Emperor to appoint his most trusted soldier.

Why the Emperor would appoint him to take command of the war effort, on the other hand, is a little harder to suss out, given that the Grand Duke has no combat experience and has had no role in any of the pre-war planning. Yes, there's the loyalty thing. But should that really trump any other consideration?

Well, it could be worse. At least the Emperor didn't appoint himself! That would have been a huge mistake.

The appointment of the Grand Duke was popular with many lower ranking officers in the Army, but commoner generals like the war minister, Vladimir Aleksandrovich Sukhomlinov, who figured *he* was the logical choice, resented it. The Grand Duke himself seems to have had doubts about his own appointment. He is said to have wept when he received it, out of fear he lacked the required skills to command the largest army in military history.

But although he hadn't participated in the pre-war planning, it was now on him to put the plan to work. Russia, you'll recall, controls Russian Poland, a salient of Russian-controlled territory that sticks out between Germany and Austria like a tongue. It's potentially vulnerable to attack from the Central Powers, but it's also a potentially valuable place to launch an offensive. The Grand Duke set up his headquarters in a railway car parked on a siding at Baranovichi, then in Russian Poland, today in Belarus, and developed his strategy.

The dilemma facing Russia was that everyone knew Germany had what was probably the best army in Europe, and Austria has what was probably the worst army in Europe. These facts alone suggest that the best strategy would be to take the offensive against Austria at once, especially since Austria is also trying to subdue Russia's ally Serbia. Austria should be easier to defeat. Actually, that comes with a few "Yes, but..." qualifications, but I want to wait until we focus on the Austrian front to discuss those. Even with the caveats, though, Austria looks easier to beat than Germany. And if Austria can be forced out of the war, then the Germans are going to find it very difficult to face Russia, France, and Britain all at the same time all alone.

That's a persuasive argument. The problem with it is it doesn't take into account the increasingly hysterical French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, who is begging the Russian government to go on the offensive against Germany as soon as possible, and preferably yesterday.

So here's what the Grand Duke came up with for a strategy. Remember that Russian Poland is wedged between Germany and Austria. To the south is Galicia, where several Austrian armies are gathering. To the north is East Prussia, where, as you know, the lone German Eighth Army is

guarding the Russian frontier while the rest of the German Army is on the offensive in the west. The Russian First Army is stationed just east of East Prussia, facing off against the Germans. So the plan is for the First Army to advance into East Prussia and engage the Germans. Once the Germans are engaged, the Russian Second Army, which is mobilizing in Russian Poland, south of East Prussia, will advance north and hit the German flank and rear, cutting off the German retreat. While this is going on, four other Russian armies will attack Galicia and tie down the three Austrian armies deploying there. Then the Russian Ninth Army, which is being held in reserve, would deploy to the far west of Russian Poland. With the Germans and the Austrians on its flanks both tied down in combat against larger Russian formations, the Ninth Army should be able to advance unopposed into eastern Germany. There. Now Moltke will have to choose between drawing down the forces attacking France and redeploying them east, or watching the Russian Ninth Army march unopposed into Berlin.

It's not an unreasonable plan. It's just that it's not going to work.

It appeared that the territories that used to be Poland were going to be the front lines of the Great War, and so on August 14, the Grand Duke issued a surprising manifesto. The Kingdom of Poland was to be reborn. The Grand Duke called upon ethnic Poles in Germany and Austria to join with the Poles of the Empire and with their Slavic brothers. After Germany and Austria were defeated, a new Polish state would be created out of the lands of former Poland, a state that would be autonomous within the Russian Empire.

How sincere this pledge was, or how likely it might have been that the Russian Emperor would have honored it, had the war gone Russia's way, are questions we could debate for a long time. But in any case, the Grand Duke's manifesto is significant because the Allies are now on the record as supporting a reconstituted Polish state, at least in some watered-down form. The question of a reborn Poland is only going to become more important as the war progresses and the Central Powers begin to make similar promises.

On August 15, the next day, the Grand Duke left St. Petersburg to take up his command at the headquarters at Baranovichi. That same day, Japan issued an ultimatum to Germany, demanding that Germany turn over control of her concession at Qingdao, on the Shandong Peninsula. Recall that Japan has an alliance agreement with the British, and ever since Britain entered the war earlier in the month, she has been asking Japan to assist in defeating German naval units in the Pacific. Japan agreed, on the condition that German colonial possessions in East Asia and the Pacific be turned over to Japan.

This ultimatum came as a blow to the German government. Japan had fought a war against Russia less than ten years ago, and the Germans were hoping to entice Japan into fighting Russia again, which would force the Russians to redeploy large numbers of troops to Asia. Now it was clear that this was not to be, and that Germany and Austria would bear the full brunt of the

Russian steamroller, and it gave Moltke and the General Staff one more reason to be nervous about their thin defense of East Prussia.

By the time the Japanese ultimatum had been delivered, the Russian First Army was already on German soil. The commander of the Russian First Army was the sixty-year old General Pavel Karlovich Rennenkampf, who was an ethnic German, as you might have guessed from his name. Just to make it a little harder to keep track of who's who. Anyway, Rennenkampf was a veteran of the Boxer Uprising and the Russo-Japanese War, where he commanded an army corps at the Battle of Mukden. The First Army was advancing even though its supply lines weren't set up yet, but the French need help, so here we are. Rennenkampf wasn't worried. His soldiers moved into Germany without opposition.

[music: *Prelude in C# minor.*]

East Prussia was the most rural part of the German Empire. It was mainly large estates worked by peasants and the occasional town. The towns were mostly evacuated, and the peasants appeared to be fleeing, after setting fire to their crops.

But the Germans proved to be shrewder than they were initially given credit for. The peasants were burning not crops, but prearranged bales of hay, so that the rising columns of black smoke would mark the lines of the Russian advance. Peasant teenagers had been issued bicycles and told to ride west and inform the nearest German Army unit whenever they spotted Russian soldiers. And some of the peasant women in the fields turned out, on closer inspection, to be German soldiers deployed in dresses to collect intelligence on Russian movements. Let's try not to think too hard about how the Russian soldiers figured that one out.

But while the First Army was advancing, the Russian Second Army was moving across Russian Poland, preparing to strike at the German flank. The commander of the Second Army was the 54-year old Alexander Vassilievich Samsonov. Samsonov was also a veteran of the Boxer Uprising and the Russo-Japanese War, and he had also held a command at the Battle of Mukden. In fact, Samsonov complained bitterly after that battle that Rennenkampf's corps had failed to support Samsonov's forces during the fighting. The two men had actually come to blows over this question. Samsonov had struck Rennenkampf and knocked him down to the ground at the Mukden railway station shortly after the battle, and the two men had been bitter enemies ever since. And, lo and behold, a German military observer was present at the station and witnessed that fight. Gee, I wonder if that's going to have consequences.

The Russians and the Germans had both already gamed out this scenario in their respective military exercises. They both knew that a Russian flanking maneuver would take a minimum of four days to get into position. Add to that the fact that the First Army began its incursion into East Prussia a couple of days ahead of schedule, and you're looking at a week or so during which the First Army will be facing the Germans alone, while the Second Army gets into position.

And as Rennenkampf's First Army advanced deeper into East Prussia, Russian logistical problems began to tell. I talked about the Russian railroad gauge back during the Russo-Japanese War. Remember that Russia uses a wider track gauge for its railroads than does any other European country. This was intended to deprive some future Napoleon of the opportunity to use Russian railroads to resupply his armies during some hypothetical future invasion of Mother Russia, but now that it was the Russians on the offensive, it was working against them. Russian rolling stock won't roll on East Prussian railroads, and the Germans have been careful to withdraw their own rolling stock to prevent it being captured. So the Russians are invading lands with beautiful modern rail lines criss-crossing them, and aren't able to take advantage of any of it.

Communication was also becoming a problem. The Germans were destroying their telegraph offices and lines as the Russians advanced, and the Russians lacked sufficient quantities of telegraph wire to string new ones. They were forced to rely on radio, which the Germans could listen in on. They used codes, but these were simple, and the Germans deciphered them with little trouble. As a result, the Germans are going to have a pretty good idea of what the Russians are up to throughout this campaign.

By now, you might be wondering, What's up with the German Eighth Army? What are they doing while one Russian Army is advancing on them and the other is maneuvering to cut off their escape? Surely now is the time to strike, before the Second Army gets into position.

To answer that, I'm going to need to introduce the commander of the German Eighth Army, the 65-year old General Maximilian Wilhelm Gustav von Prittwitz und Gaffron. Why, yes, he is a scion of one of those old Prussian aristocratic families, why do you ask?

Unfortunately for the Eighth Army, Prittwitz was one of those military officers who had advanced through the ranks more through his family connections and shrewd use of the social ladder than any notable military accomplishments. He was known for self-regard and self-indulgence and had a knack for staying on the Kaiser's good side, but his high opinion of himself was not shared by his fellow generals, who referred to him as *Der Dicke*. That's not quite as nasty in German as it sounds in English, but it still means "the fat guy." Moltke had opposed his being appointed to command the Eighth Army, but had been overruled.

The role of the Eighth Army is to defend East and West Prussia against Russian invasion. This is a rural region of the country, full of dairy farms and forests, but it is also the heart of old Prussia and the place where the Prussian Junkers, the most influential of the German aristocracy, have their estates. From a strictly military or economic standpoint, a Russian occupation of the region would not be a grave concern, but it would have symbolic significance, besides curtailing the incomes of some of Germany's most important aristocrats.

The easternmost major city in Germany is Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia. The name means "King's Mountain" in German. Königsberg was founded by the Teutonic Knights in 1255

and was the capital of the old Duchy of Prussia back in the day. Today it is the capital of the province of East Prussia and home to some 250,000 of Kaiser Wilhelm's subjects, and is well fortified.

Prittwitz's orders were to defend the region, to take no offensive action, but also not to allow the Eighth Army to be overwhelmed or encircled. Specifically, he was ordered not to fall back into the fortifications at Königsberg and allow his army to be cut off and bypassed. It was important to keep the Eighth Army between the Russians and Berlin; therefore, as a last resort, the Eighth Army should abandon East Prussia altogether and fall back behind the broad Vistula River, which is also the boundary between East Prussia and West Prussia. But Prittwitz, as we shall see, will interpret the phrase "last resort" to mean "first resort."

The German command knew that the Russian First Army would be on its own for about a week before the Second Army began its own offensive. So the plan was to allow the First Army a couple of days to advance into East Prussia, hopefully outrun its supply lines, then meet it in battle near the town of Gumbinnen, about twenty-five miles inside the border. Alas for sound planning, the commander of the I Corps, Hermann von François (who was of French ancestry, if you haven't guessed) had other ideas. I Corps was composed largely of units recruited in East Prussia, and they weren't of a mood to sit back and watch the Russians burn their homes. François, confident of the superiority of German troops, advanced well beyond the defensive line Prittwitz was trying to set up, and by the time Prittwitz found out what François was up to and sent him a sternly worded written order to withdraw, as well as reminding him just who is in command around here, François replied with the news that I Corps was already in contact with the enemy at the town of Stallupönen, just five miles from the border, and that he would break off combat and withdraw per his orders just as soon as he was finished defeating the Russians.

The result was the Battle of Stallupönen on August 17, the first engagement between Russia and Germany. François managed to slip a brigade behind the Russian force. When artillery shells began raining down on them from behind, a Russian division broke and fled, forcing the rest of the Russian corps to withdraw, and netting François some 3,000 Russian prisoners. That night, he withdrew toward Gumbinnen, confident that his low opinion of Russian soldiers had been vindicated, and confident as well that he had shown himself to be the only officer in the German Army who truly understood how to defeat them.

But despite this setback, Rennenkampf's First Army continued its advance into East Prussia the next day. The Russians saw the Germans retiring, and drew the opposite conclusion: that they were chasing the Germans right out of East Prussia. That was actually a bad thing; Samsonov's Second Army was due to attack north from Poland in a few days. They were supposed to move *behind* the German Eighth Army, but if the Germans withdrew too quickly, they would escape the trap. So on August 20, Rennenkampf ordered his army to halt.

This presented Prittwitz with a dilemma. His army had already established a defensive line, and was trying to lure the Russians into attacking it. But François's antics had induced the Russians to stop before they got to the chosen battlefield. What to do? Then word came that the Russian Second Army had crossed the border. Prittwitz now had a choice. Advance on the First Army and try to defeat them before the Second Army has time to arrive, or else turn around and go after the Second Army. Either way, his carefully prepared defensive position would have to be abandoned.

Prittwitz chose the first option, and ordered an attack on the Russian First Army on August 20. Characteristically, François jumped the gun, attacking the Russian right flank at 4:00 that morning. They caught the Russians by surprise and the attack was initially a success. But German units in the center were hampered by civilian refugees fleeing from the Russians and didn't get their attack going until after 8:00. The attack on the Russian left flank didn't get going until noon. Needless to say, by then these Russians were not surprised; they laid down heavy artillery fire and broke the German attack.

Prittwitz more or less panicked at this point. With his offense broken, and the Second Army coming up behind him, this is the point where that order about falling back to the Vistula as a last resort came to mind, and so Prittwitz ordered a withdrawal to the Vistula.

Rennenkampf, meanwhile, saw the German withdrawal, but did not aggressively pursue. He was much criticized for this decision later, which may have cost Russia the campaign, if not the war, but it's worth noting that he was already outrunning his supply lines, and probably had legitimate concerns about how quickly his army could advance, as well as that concern that if he pushed them too hard, he might push the Germans right out of the trap the Second Army was preparing for them.

At the German Eighth Army headquarters, cooler heads were doing their best to prevail. The corps commanders pointed out to Prittwitz that the advancing Second Army was already closer to the Vistula than they were, which suggested it was already impossible to get the entire Eighth Army west of them, and it would be disastrous to try. Instead, they proposed withdrawing the rest of the Eighth Army to a position equidistant from the two Russian armies, while sending the overeager François and his I Corps to harry the Second Army. If the First Army continued to hold its position for the next few days, which is what the Germans were guessing it would, owing to the supply issues, there would be an opportunity to surprise the Second Army with a full-scale attack. The other officers agreed, but Prittwitz vetoed the idea. Too risky, he said.

Back at Headquarters, Moltke was beside himself when he heard of what Prittwitz was proposing. The Battle of Gumbinnen had been disappointing, but not only was Prittwitz telling Moltke he intended to withdraw behind the Vistula, he was also talking about how low the river was during the August heat, and suggesting he would be unable to hold even that line without

reinforcements. Reinforcements! Those would have to come from the offensive in the West, and could make the difference between victory and defeat on that front.

The Eighth Army needed a change of leadership. Someone dynamic. Someone with the courage to take risks. Their first thought back at Headquarters was the hero of Liège, Erich Ludendorff, whom we met in episode 82. Ludendorff was the Deputy Chief of Staff in the Second Army and was at that moment helping to direct the siege of Namur. He was needed there, but Moltke decided he was needed in the East even more, and so he was summoned. He was a commoner, and not senior enough to be given command of the Eighth Army, but he was ready to become its chief of staff, a position that was almost as important. And so the call went out on the morning of August 22. By nightfall, Ludendorff was on a special train headed for East Prussia, and was already issuing orders to the corps commanders of the Eighth Army, directing them to move against the Second Army. And, by the way, bypassing Prittwitz and the Eighth Army HQ, who haven't been told yet what is about to happen.

And even Ludendorff didn't know yet who was to be the new commander of the Eighth Army. All he had been told was that his special train was going to stop off at Hanover to pick him up, and that Ludendorff would be expected to brief him on the way to East Prussia.

Choosing a new commander for the Eighth Army was a tougher problem than finding a new chief of staff. But officers at Moltke's headquarters recalled a respected retired general, one of those Junker aristocrats with a "von" in front of his name, who had written in to the General Staff at the beginning of the war, offering to come out of retirement if he were needed. He was "still robust," he had promised in his letter, although he was 67 years old. But, hey, that wasn't any older than Kluck or Bülow or Hausen, the commanders of the First, Second, and Third Armies, respectively, who were being entrusted with the most critical commands in the German Army. Let's give this guy a shot. His name was Paul von Hindenburg.

Ludendorff's special train reached Hanover at 4:00 AM on August 23, and Ludendorff stepped onto the platform to report to his new commander, who was waiting for him dressed in Prussian blue, the old army uniform, from before Prussian blue was replaced with field gray. Hindenburg had retired before then, so he didn't own one of the new uniforms.

And so began the partnership that would all but rule Germany by the end of the war, riding on that special train to the battle that would make them famous. It must have been flattering to both men to have been chosen for this crucial assignment, but also more than a little intimidating. The decisions they made in the next week might well determine the outcome of the war.

I Corps and a few auxiliary units were already in the middle of the transfer south and west to face the Russian Second Army. The Germans had high quality railroads in East Prussia and were now putting them to good use. I Corps would be in place in two days, but it was too late to stop or reverse the transfer. Another army corps was already in place as a screen against the Russians, so the movement of I Corps meant that nearly half of the whole Eighth Army was now being

deployed against the Second Army. So here's the big question Hindenburg and Ludendorff now have to decide, even before their train arrives at Eighth Army Headquarters: Do we send the rest of Eighth Army to follow I Corps to the new front? Do we recall I Corps? Do we keep our forces divided? Or do we follow Prittwitz's lead and withdraw? Okay, maybe not the last one.

A lot depends on what Rennenkampf and the Russian First Army do. If Eighth Army were to redeploy just as First Army decided to begin advancing again, Eighth Army would be caught off guard and vulnerable. But for now, Rennenkampf is staying put, just thirty miles to the east.

Meanwhile, the Russian commanders faced a dilemma of their own. The French have just lost the Battle of the Frontiers, and Paris is crying out louder than ever to St. Petersburg to attack the Germans, already! Stavka, the Russian high command, is in turn pressuring Samsonov and his Second Army to get moving faster.

Now, in hindsight, you might think that Rennenkampf and his First Army are the ones that need pressuring. But from Stavka's point of view, First Army has already advanced into enemy territory and already tussled with the Germans. Now it's about time for the other jaw of the trap to get moving.

Samsonov's difficulty sprang from the fact that he was moving through very rural, sparsely populated, and underdeveloped land. The Russians couldn't use German railway lines, paved roads were unheard of, and the soft, sandy soil shifted under the feet, wearying his tired soldiers. Worse, the wheels of the horse-drawn supply wagons and artillery carriages the Russians used were sinking into the ground and the horses couldn't pull them anymore. Russian soldiers had to improvise a system in which they unhitched half of their horses from half the wagons so they could double up the horses on the other half, draw those wagons ten miles forward, then unhitch the horses and walk them ten miles back to drag the other half. I don't have to tell you that this is a slow and time-consuming way of moving an army.

[music: *Prelude in C# minor.*]

On August 23, the same day Hindenburg and Ludendorff arrived at their new command, Samsonov received yet another set of orders from Stavka urging him on. "You are to attack and intercept the enemy retiring before General Rennenkampf's army in order to cut off his retreat from the Vistula." Samsonov engaged the German screening forces the next day and was able to push them back, albeit with higher Russian casualties than he might have hoped for. But this success raised hopes at Stavka, which ordered Samsonov to press on and continue the attack on the 25th.

But the Second Army had run out of telegraph wire, and they didn't have any code books, so Stavka was forced to send Samsonov his orders over the wireless and in the clear, meaning that Hindenburg and Ludendorff got Samsonov's orders just as soon as he did. They still didn't know what Rennenkampf's intentions were, but now they knew exactly what Samsonov's next moves

were going to be, and that was good enough to end their indecision. And then one of the deputy staff officers stepped forward. This was the guy who had been at the Battle of Mukden as a German military observer, and now he told the story of how Samsonov had decked Rennenkampf at the train station after the battle. From that incident he concluded that Rennenkampf would be in no hurry to rush to Samsonov's aid.

This was all the information the new commanders needed. Hindenburg and Ludendorff ordered the rest of the Eighth Army to wheel around and go on the attack against Samsonov.

That same day, August 25, Eighth Army got a phone call from Moltke's headquarters. Two army corps were to be detached from the Western Front and sent east to strengthen the Eighth Army. Ludendorff was shocked. He had recently come from the Western Front himself and knew as well as anyone how careful and intricate was the battle plan. Was the High Command seriously going to jeopardize the Western offensive for their sake? While reinforcements were always welcome, Ludendorff pointed out that the decisive battle for East Prussia was already in motion and the reinforcements wouldn't arrive in time to make the difference. But the refugees moving west from East Prussia were attracting attention. And more importantly, the Junkers' outcry over their burned farms and lost income was heard by the Kaiser and the Kaiserin. In the aftermath of the Battle of the Frontiers, Moltke was feeling pretty confident that France was all but beaten, and the two army corps could be spared. This will have consequences.

Samsonov continued to push his Second Army north and west, hoping to reach the Vistula before the Germans could, and to cut the rail line linking East Prussia to the rest of Germany. But the inability of the supply wagons to keep up with the advancing army was taking its toll. There were no oats for the horses; there was no bread for the soldiers.

Rennenkampf's First Army began advancing again, but he was plagued with the same supply problems as Samsonov. When the German I Corps withdrew to Königsberg, Rennenkampf read that move as the corps holing up in the city's fortifications. What was actually happening was, they were embarking on trains for their journey to face the Russian Second Army, but Rennenkampf left screening forces to besiege the Germans he thought were holing up in Königsberg. As they advanced farther, they captured the recently evacuated Eighth Army positions, which Rennenkampf read as a defeated army making a hasty retreat, when actually they were turning on the Second Army. Rennenkampf reported his findings to Stavka, who duly told Samsonov that the Germans were in retreat and he must pursue with all speed. Of course, the Germans heard them telling him this.

On August 26, the main force of the Eighth Army attacked Samsonov's right flank. By August 27, François's I Corps was assaulting Samsonov's left flank. The rest of the Second Army pushed on in what they thought was a pursuit against a defeated foe. But both flanks began to falter as their supplies ran out. By nightfall, the realization had come to Samsonov that he was no

longer springing a trap on a faltering enemy, but rather, the trap was being sprung on him. On August 28, he ordered his center to pull back. But it was already too late.

By August 29, after three days of heavy fighting, the Second Army had been all but entirely encircled. Of the 170,000 soldiers in Second Army, only about 10,000 escaped the trap. 78,000 were killed or wounded, and over 90,000 taken prisoner. That night, lost in the wilderness with his staff, General Samsonov shot and killed himself, rather than face either the ignominy of capture, or the disgrace of facing the Emperor. Of Second Army's five corps commanders, two were captured. The three who escaped were relieved of their commands. It is said that it took sixty trains to carry away all the equipment the Germans had captured. Corrals were hastily built to pen the horses.

Three Russian army corps had been destroyed, and a further two reduced to tatters. At Ludendorff's suggestion, the Germans would dub this battle "the Battle of Tannenberg." It did not take place precisely at that location, but the name was chosen to echo a famous defeat of the Teutonic Knights by Polish and Lithuanian forces in the year 1410. Now, 504 years later, the Germans would have their revenge.

With the Second Army crushed, Hindenburg and Ludendorff turned their tired, battle-weary soldiers east to confront Rennenkampf's First Army. As the Battle of Tannenberg was unfolding, and the urgency of the situation was becoming clearer, First Army had hastened southwest to help. Now that the Germans were turning on them, they were strung out over a large area and ill-prepared to defend themselves. With the two German army corps from the West finally arrived, the now numerically superior Eighth Army attacked Rennenkampf's First Army beginning September 7, in what will come to be called the Battle of the Masurian Lakes.

After four days of heavy fighting, the Germans were able to use their superior numbers to outflank the Russians to the south. Fortunately for Rennenkampf, he was able to organize a retreat quickly enough to avoid the same fate, but at the cost of First Army completely giving up its gains in East Prussia and retreating into the fortifications on the Russian side of the border.

And just like that, the Russian threat to walk into Berlin and end the war before the Germans reached Paris had been eliminated. The Battle of Tannenberg would be the greatest tactical triumph of the war, and it would make Hindenburg and Ludendorff the biggest heroes in Germany. In Russia, its consequences would not be fully understood for some time yet. Russian commanders were still accustomed to thinking of manpower as an inexhaustible resource. The Great War would prove them wrong about this, but not yet. Anyway, Russia's victories against Austria-Hungary at this time will take a lot of the sting out of these defeats, as we will see.

And what of those two army corps that had been withdrawn from the Western Front?

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you to listener John for becoming a patron of the podcast. If you'd like to become a patron, head on over to the website,

historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the Patreon button. Your support helps me keep doing this crazy thing I've decided to do. You can also help by sharing posts about the podcast on Facebook, tweeting and retweeting on Twitter, and by leaving a rating and review of the podcast at the iTunes store.

I'm going to take a week off for the Labor Day holiday in the United States, but I hope you'll join me again in two weeks' time on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we turn our attention back to the Western Front as the German offensive enters its final phase. Will German soldiers march through Paris a second time in less than fifty years? Or can the French pull off a Miracle on the Marne? Find out in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Those of you who have read ahead in the history of the twentieth century already know that the team of Hindenburg and Ludendorff is only going to become more important to the German war effort. Later on, after Hindenburg received his promotion to field marshal, he will come to be referred to, behind his back of course, as "Marshal *Was-sagst-du*." This was because whenever he was asked a question, he was notorious for turning to Ludendorff first and asking, "*Was sagst du?*" "What do you say?"

[music: Closing War Theme]