CLIMAX IN THE BALTIC:
THE GERMAN MARITIME OFFENSIVE IN THE
GULF OF RIGA IN OCTOBER 1917

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On 17 October 1917, only three weeks before the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd on 7 November, an engagement occurred in the Gulf of Riga between the German dreadnought battleships König and Kronprinz and three Russian capital ships of the previous generation, the pre-dreadnought battleships Slava and Grazhdanin and the armoured cruiser Bayan. This was the largest clash of major units in the Baltic of the entire First World War and its context was perhaps the most successful amphibious operation of that conflict, ‘Operation Albion’, the German capture of the islands of Osel, Dago and Moon.

This was the culmination of just over three years of maritime warfare in a theatre that is usually forgotten, except for the recovery of German codes from the grounded German light cruiser Magdeburg when she was scuttled as she was set upon by the Russian cruisers Pallada and Bogatyr on 26 August 1914. These were passed to the British to give the Admiralty’s code breakers great assistance. Shortly after this debacle the Germans had tried a major sortie with a powerful force of pre-dreadnoughts and cruisers (including the ill fated near battle cruiser Blücher) but the Russian cruisers encountered fled to the Gulf of Finland which was defended by formidable minefields.

The mine reigned supreme in the Baltic and the Russians used this underwater weapon aggressively as well as defensively, laying fields off the German coast as far west as Rugen and in the Gulf of Bothnia until ice prevented further operation after mid February 1915. These claimed a notable victim in November 1914 in the shape of the German armoured cruiser Friedrich Karl; many smaller vessels were also sunk. Submarines also scored successes, a U-boat sinking the Russian armoured cruiser Pallada in October 1914.

In 1915 the Russians established a ‘Forward Position’ minefield further west in the mouth of the Gulf of Finland between Hango and the island of Dago. This increased the importance of the Gulf of Riga as the ‘Forward Position’ drove any advancing German forces into the
Map 3.