

World War I

The Opening Gambit I



In the prelude to WWI, both the French and Germans planned for a quick defeat of the enemy. When the war opened, it was the German plan that *almost* worked.

by *Brian Farmer*

German military operations of the First World War began on the Western or Franco-Belgian front. To understand why Europe slid so rapidly into the abyss (for the background, see “Prelude to the Guns of August,” *THE NEW AMERICAN*, August 25, 2014), one needs to consider the strategic position in which Germany found itself. As explained in that previous article in this series covering the 100th-anniversary period of World War I, military mobilization effectively meant war for every nation that took such action. This was especially true for Germany because it was outnumbered by its opponents and because of the German war plan, which had been shaped by the recognition of Germany’s numerically inferior position. Open to attack from the west (by France) and from the east (by Russia), Germany would be facing armies almost twice the size of the combined German and Austro-Hungarian forces. If Germany divided its army equally, placing half in the west to face France and half in the east to face Russia, then the numerical superi-

ority of strength arrayed against it would be virtually impossible to withstand, especially if the war turned out to be a protracted one, since Germany was not in a position to win a war of attrition.

The Von Schlieffen Plan

The war plan that Germany ultimately adopted was created by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the General Staff from 1891 to 1905. Schlieffen decided that the only course for Germany, when faced with a war on two fronts, was to concentrate its forces in order to defeat one enemy, then to turn and deal with the other foe. Germany would literally have to fight two separate, consecutive wars, using almost its whole army for each one. This course of action was possible only because Germany could mobilize much more rapidly than could Russia, due to its superior rail network and smaller land area. Schlieffen’s proposal was to exploit the resulting time gap between the completion of the German and Russian mobilizations for a sudden attack on France. Three considerations made France the target for the first attack: (1) France could

German infantry are shown advancing on the battlefield in 1914. The spiked helmets proved to be more ornamental than practical and were later replaced by helmets that were designed to provide more protection.

mobilize more quickly than could Russia, making it initially the more dangerous adversary; (2) the Russian concentration of forces might take place too far to the east for German forces to reach quickly, which would likely cause a spoiling attack to fail; and (3) the Russian forces might retreat into the interior of its enormous land mass, thus depriving Germany of the quick victory it needed.

The gap in time between the completion of the German and Russian mobilizations was estimated to be no more than six weeks. It was during that time span that France had to be knocked out of the war, freeing Germany to turn east and deal with the Russian forces that would by then be expected to come pouring over Germany’s eastern frontier. But how was France to be beaten in just six weeks? The Franco-German border was 150 miles long, and half of it was covered by the Vosges Mountains, with only the gap around the Belfort area providing an easy entry into France. Making the situation even worse, France had extended its natural defenses by a chain of fortifications that ran by way of

Belfort and Verdun to the borders of Luxembourg and Belgium. Just past Verdun lay the Ardennes region, which was hilly and wooded and would slow any advance. Schlieffen was convinced that a frontal assault could achieve only limited success because the enemy could just fall back and survive to fight another day. From the German perspective, this type of war was useless, for with every day that victory was delayed in the West, the Russians would be growing stronger in the East. From his study of military history, Schlieffen concluded that a quick victory was possible only if French forces could be outflanked and encircled.

Obviously, there were two flanks to the French defensive line. If the Germans moved to their left (around the southern flank of the French line), they would have to pass through the Jura Mountains of Switzerland, which would slow their advance, and they would emerge far from any vital point in France. However, studies that Schlieffen conducted during staff rides convinced him that, by moving very wide to the right (around the northern flank of the French line), through Luxembourg, Belgium, and the southern part of Holland, it would be possible to circumvent the French defenses. The invasion of Dutch territory seemed necessary, because any German advance north of the Ardennes would run into the narrow gorge of the Meuse River valley, which was blocked by the fortress city of Liège. By marching north of Liège, through the southern part of Holland, German forces could bypass the Liège fortress. Thus, at the same time that Schlieffen was exploiting a gap in time, he would also be exploiting a gap in space. This double exploitation of the two

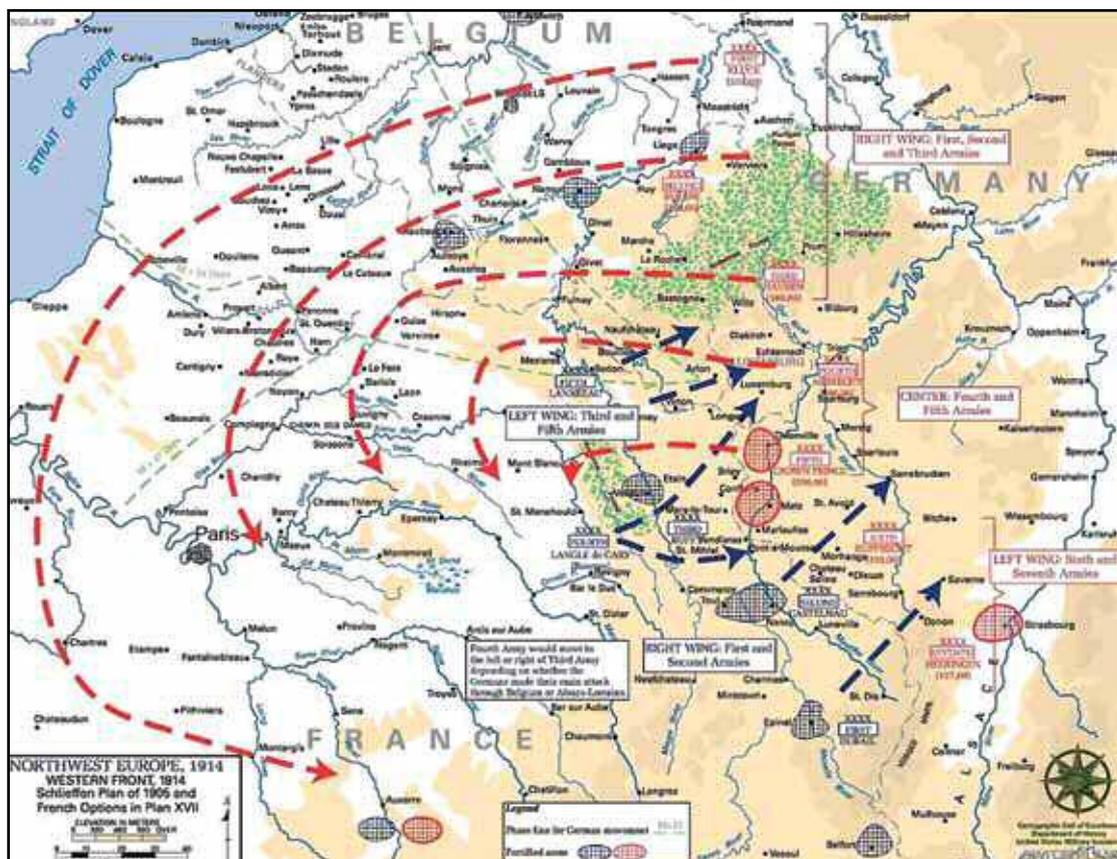
enemies' weaknesses was the key to the plan and the brilliance of the strategy.

Although Luxembourg, Belgium, and Holland were neutral countries, Schlieffen and the German General Staff did not worry about the infamy that would accompany the violation of their neutrality. The German military leadership believed that France intended to violate Belgian neutrality, no matter what Germany did, and Schlieffen was convinced that concentrating German forces on the border with Belgium would lure French forces into invading Belgium first, in order to set up a better defensive line in the Meuse River valley. Indeed, until 1912, French war plans called for the invasion of Belgium, and it was only the political consideration of Great Britain's attitude toward such a maneuver that caused France to abandon it.

Schlieffen's plan called for positioning 10 divisions in East Prussia, in order to defend against a Russian invasion. All of the rest of the German army would be

deployed in the west against France, and the bulk of it would go to the right (north) wing, which would pivot at Metz, march through Belgium and northern France, cross the Seine River to the northwest of Paris, sweep around Paris to the west and south, and hammer the French army back against the Swiss frontier (see map). This hammerhead of a right wing was to be as strong as possible, and Schlieffen allotted 79 divisions to it. The German left (south) wing, holding the line from Metz to the Swiss frontier, was to be given only nine divisions, some reserve forces, and the garrisons of Metz and Strasbourg. Schlieffen anticipated that, at the outset of war, France would launch attacks against Alsace-Lorraine. He therefore planned that his left wing would swing back, again pivoting at Metz, in order to lure the French army away from the decisive northern sector.

However, the German army was never large enough to be able to deploy the number of divisions necessary to ensure



The Schlieffen Plan (shown here) called for luring French forces into attacking the German left wing, while a strong German right wing quickly encircled Paris and forced a French capitulation. Germany was not able to field enough troops to carry out the plan successfully.

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that Schlieffen's plan could be carried out successfully. Worse still, the addition of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to the French order of battle was to make the German troop shortage desperate, especially after the Italians, who were supposed to fight on Germany's side in southern France, failed to honor their commitments under the provisions of the Triple Alliance.

Too Many Generals Spoil the War

General Helmuth von Moltke succeeded Schlieffen as chief of the General Staff in 1905. Moltke was unhappy with the Schlieffen Plan, considering it to be too much of a gamble. Although he was right, his attempts to make it less of a gamble undermined rather than enhanced its chances of success. He worried about the weakness of the German left wing from Metz to the Swiss border and feared that a French offensive would cut in behind his forces and sever his lines of communications. Moltke therefore assigned most of the new divisions that became available between 1905 and 1914 to the left wing rather than to the right wing. By doing so, Moltke gained some imagined security but actually created a greater risk, for the whole point of Schlieffen's strategy had been to emphasize the weight of the swinging hammerhead of the right wing. The concentration of force on the right and the great wheeling-around maneuver were meant to increase the chances that the German army would fight its decisive battle with a local superiority of force. This calculation was not a certainty, for the French might be able to switch their forces to the threat-

ened sector in time to thwart the German strategy. Hence, the weakness of the German left wing was as much a part of the Schlieffen Plan as was the strength of the right wing. The more deeply that the French became committed to Alsace-Lorraine, the

less hope they would have of disengaging themselves in time to meet the German sloop from the north and west. By altering the relative strengths of his wings, Moltke showed that he did not adequately comprehend the essence of Schlieffen's strategy.

The second important change initiated by Moltke was the cancellation of the invasion of Dutch territory. He wrote:

A hostile Holland at our back could have disastrous consequences for the

advance of the German army to the west. Particularly if England should use the violation of Belgian neutrality as a pretext for entering the war against us....

Furthermore it will be very important to have in Holland a country whose neutrality allows us to have imports and supplies. She must be the windpipe that enables us to breathe.

Those comments are significant, because they show that Moltke had lost confidence in the quick victory on the Western Front that Germany needed. "Imports and supplies" are vital considerations for a protracted war but are of minor concern for a six-week campaign. As the alternative to marching across southern Holland, Moltke decided that the potential bottleneck in the Meuse River valley at Liège would have to be cleared at the outbreak of hostilities, which meant that Belgium would have to be invaded while the German mobilization was still under way.

The French war plan, known as Plan XVII, which was completed in February of 1914 under the direction of General Joseph Joffre, played perfectly into the expectations of the Schlieffen Plan. Joffre anticipated that Germany would invade Belgium but did not believe that the Germans would try to move in force west of the Meuse River. A German advance into Belgium was welcomed, since Joffre calculated that, if Germany strengthened its right wing, then either its center or its left wing must be relatively weak. He therefore proposed to attack first the German left wing in the region between Metz and Strasbourg, and then to launch a second offensive against the German center north of Metz. French intelligence underestimated German strength, assuming that Germany, like France, would not use its reserves at the outbreak of the war. It was this miscalculation that helped to compensate Germany for its shortage of troops under the



German General Helmuth von Moltke was a reluctant chief of staff, chosen by the Kaiser for his name (his great uncle was a victorious military leader against France during 1870) rather than for his leadership qualities.



French General Joseph Joffre (in dark uniform, sporting white mustache) is shown here inspecting troops. His Plan XVII proved to be a failure, but he learned from his mistakes and ultimately succeeded in turning back the German invasion of France.

Schlieffen Plan and allowed the plan to be as successful as it was in the opening weeks of the war.

Liège was considered to be one of the strongest fortresses in Europe. The city was protected by 12 forts, arranged in a ring 10 miles in diameter and dominating the surrounding terrain with their guns. Although its position was very strong, its garrison of 40,000 men was not large enough to defend the gaps between the forts. The German plan was for special units, under cover of artillery fire, to penetrate the gaps between the forts and capture the city. Those units crossed into Belgium on August 4 and encountered entrenched Belgian infantry. After several days of heavy fighting, Liège finally fell on August 7. But the forts continued to hold out, so, on August 12, the Germans brought up their heavy siege guns. These 42-centimeter howitzers, the heaviest artillery used up to that time, were too much for the forts, since they had been built to withstand shelling from only up to 21-centimeter cannon fire. The last fort fell on August 16, allowing the westward march of the German First and Second armies to begin on the right wing.

The initial meeting of the main Allied and German armies on the Western Front consisted of four separate engagements, which became known as the Battle of the Fron-

tiers. The first engagement was the French offensive in Lorraine, which commenced on August 14. For four days the Germans fell back slowly, delaying with rear guards and artillery fire, and inflicting heavy casualties. As the planned final line of resistance was neared, the German defense stiffened. On August 20, the Germans counterattacked and pushed the French back all along the line. For the next five days, the French withdrew and established themselves on the fortified heights around Nancy. Believing the French armies to be beaten, Moltke changed the battle plan and authorized offensive operations around Nancy, something that Schlieffen had always warned against. The French defeat in Lorraine actually turned out well for France, because it tied down German troops and kept Moltke from sending them to his right wing, where they might have made a difference in the final outcome of the campaign.

The second engagement was the Battle of the Ardennes, named for the forested area in southern Belgium to the west of Luxembourg. The German Fourth and Fifth armies, forming the pivot of the great German wheel at the center of the Western Front, had been moving forward slowly, regulating their advance with the speed of the hammerhead, the First and Second armies further to the north. The zones of advance for the German Fourth and Fifth

armies caused them to collide with the French Third and Fourth armies on August 22. The French attacked vigorously, taking enormous losses, and finally fell back after three days of bloody fighting. Receiving reports of a smashing victory, German headquarters got the impression that the two French armies had been almost eliminated. In fact, they were ready and able to fight again.

The third engagement was the Battle of the Sambre, which took place at the angle formed by the confluence of the Sambre and Meuse rivers near Namur, and where the French Fifth Army had taken up a position by August 20. On August 21, advance units of the German Second Army reached the Sambre River and attacked. A bloody, disconnected battle followed, lasting into the night. The French counterattacked on the following day but were thrown back with heavy losses. The commander of the French Fifth Army, General Charles Lanrezac, planned to attack again on August 23, but received news that the German Third Army had crossed the Meuse River to the south, forcing him to send some of his forces there to head off the Germans, protect his rear area, and allow the rest of his forces to withdraw. It was another German victory, but the French Fifth Army had survived to fight again.

The fourth engagement was the Battle of Mons, where the BEF had taken up a position on August 22. Advance units of the German First Army struck the British position on August 23 and launched a series of attacks in close formation, which gave the British marksmen an opportunity to inflict heavy casualties. But the BEF, being greatly outnumbered, and hearing that the French Fifth Army was withdrawing on its right flank, realized that it would be futile to stand alone and began a retreat on August 24.

Although the Battle of the Frontiers resulted in the collapse of the French offensive plan, General Joffre and his staff now had a better understanding of the German plan and set about to take appropriate countermeasures. Moltke, on the other hand, elated by the exaggerated reports of German successes, entertained the illusion that he was on the verge of winning the war. At this time, the Russians had already started to invade East Prussia and the news from the Eastern Front was not good. Moltke felt that he could afford to transfer some of his forces from the Second and Third armies to East Prussia. Moltke was thus doing the very opposite of what Schlieffen had always stressed: “Keep the right wing strong!”

After three days of retreat from Mons, the BEF decided to stand its ground at Le Cateau on August 26. The German First Army attacked and threatened to envelop the British forces, but the French Second Cavalry Corps arrived just in time to divert the attention of the Germans and allow the British to withdraw. Meanwhile, the French Fifth Army was retreating from its action on the Sambre River to the area around Guise, situated about 15 miles south of Le Cateau. The German Second Army arrived on August 29 and attacked from the north, driving back the French

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AP Images

Battle of Liège: Because German General Helmuth von Moltke decided not to move through southern Holland in the opening offensive on the Western Front, this forced German forces to have to neutralize the Belgian fortress of Liège. German cavalry are shown assembling prior to the attack on the city.

troops. French reserves were then brought up and, in a general counterattack, drove the Germans north until darkness closed the battle. The German Second Army was so badly mauled that it stood in place for a day and a half, thus allowing the BEF and the French Fifth Army to continue their retreat without interference.

After the Battle of Le Cateau, the German First Army, under the command of General Alexander von Kluck, continued its march to the southwest. On August 30, Kluck received a message from General Karl von Bülow, commander of the German Second Army, announcing that the French at Guise had been defeated “in a decisive fashion” and requesting Kluck to help exploit the victory by moving southeastward. Kluck realized that Moltke at headquarters should be consulted, but the speed of communications was such that several days would elapse before he could receive a reply. Meanwhile, the golden opportunity described by Bülow would have passed. Kluck therefore decided to do as Bülow wished and changed his direction of advance, so as to pass to the east of Paris, rather than to the west, a decision that was to have far-reaching consequences.

Kluck’s change in direction

was noted by the French, which induced Joffre to change his strategic plan and halt the limits of the Allied retreat southward to a huge arc extending from Paris to Verdun. Joffre’s revised plan also called for the newly assembled French Sixth Army in Paris to be ready for a quick counterstroke. Moltke was aware that French forces building up in Paris were becoming formidable and that sizable German forces would be needed to hold them off, until the envelopment of the main French armies had been completed. Moltke therefore ordered Kluck to move his army in such a manner as to protect the German right flank, but failed to inform Kluck of the French forces building up in Paris. It appeared to Kluck that Moltke wanted the French forces to be driven southeastward, away from Paris. Because of the poor communications with German headquarters, Kluck decided to continue his advance southward, in order to cross the Marne River and overtake the French Fifth Army (now commanded by General Louis Franchet d’Esperey) with the bulk of his forces, while leaving a smaller force north of the Marne River, in order to guard against any threat from the direction of Paris.

Beginning of the End

Allied forces began their counterattack along the whole length of the front from Paris to Verdun on September 5. At the

eastern end of the battle line the assault achieved little. At the western end, however, the BEF joined an effective counteroffensive that was spearheaded by the newly formed French Ninth Army. But it was the outflanking move of the French Sixth Army from Paris that did the most to unhinge the German position. Finally aware that the French Sixth Army was a major threat to his rear, Kluck ordered his troops to withdraw northward across the Marne River to the French Sixth Army front. This maneuver created a wide gap between the German First and Second armies, and would ultimately lead to the abandonment of the Schlieffen Plan and the doom of the German campaign on the Western Front.

During the ensuing battles, the Germans initially gained the upper hand. However, the BEF was able to exploit the gap that had opened between the German First and Second armies and advanced into it, which threw Moltke into a panic. The limited amount of information filtering into German headquarters convinced Moltke that the battle was in the process of being lost. On September 8, he dispatched a staff officer, Colonel Richard Hentsch, from his headquarters in Belgium to the battlefield, with the authority to order a retreat, should Hentsch judge it to be necessary. Hentsch drove along the battlefield, became convinced that the situation near Paris was critical, and ordered a retreat to the Aisne River on September 9. The retreat was intended

to be temporary and, after regrouping, the Germans would try to resume their advance.

By September 14, German forces had completed their retreat and had set up formidable defensive positions along the Aisne River. When the Allies' repeated frontal attacks against these positions failed, they attempted to envelop the German flank on the north. This initiated a series of enveloping maneuvers by both sides, each determined to outflank the other, which succeeded only in extending the front farther and farther northward. The final clashes took place between the Lys River and the English Channel in the First Battle of Ypres from October 12 to November 11. The Allies and the Germans fought desperately to succeed in this last opportunity for envelopment, but without success. Exhausted and running low on ammunition, the two sides began to dig in and strengthen their positions. Trench warfare was about to begin.

By the end of 1914, it had become apparent that both the French Plan XVII and the German Schlieffen Plan had completely failed. Under the prevailing circumstances, Plan XVII was unrealistic and never had a chance of success. General Joffre had underestimated German capabilities for a major campaign west of the Meuse River, and the French attacks were made over terrain that was not favorable for large-scale offensive action. Also, an unreasonable faith had been placed in the deeply implanted French of-

fensive strategy: 80 percent of the infantry officers were either killed or wounded during the first five months of the war. Joffre was responsible for the disastrous Plan XVII but, when his strategy collapsed in the Battle of the Frontiers, he did not panic or get discouraged. Instead, he kept his head and shifted forces to the left wing, in order to halt the German advance and then to counterattack. Joffre maintained good communications with his officers throughout the campaign. As a result, he was always familiar with the military situation, and his subordinates were never in doubt as to what he wanted them to do.

The Schlieffen Plan depended for its success on close control, speed of execution, and a strong encircling right wing. It failed primarily because of General von Moltke's lack of direction and control, for which inadequate communications were partly to blame. It is difficult to understand why the Germans, who were usually precise and well prepared, had neglected this vital area of military support. Moltke remained aloof in his headquarters far to the rear and let his subordinates have their own way. As a result, they failed to cooperate with each other and did not follow the strategic plan. All German commanders made the error of interpreting their early successes as decisive victories and the planned French withdrawal as a total rout. The Battle of the Marne was a great strategic victory for the Allies, and it turned out to be the turning point of the entire war. ■

