

The Schlieffen Plan and Reasons for Its Failure

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Introduction

The Schlieffen Plan is often described as Germany's simple attempt to defeat France quickly and then transfer forces east against Russia. That summary captures the strategic problem but hides the plan's evolution, assumptions, logistical demands, and disputed relationship to the campaign of 1914. The original essay correctly recognizes Germany's fear of a two-front war, the importance of railways, the invasion of Belgium, Russian mobilization, and the Battle of the Marne. It also contains major errors: France did not surrender in thirty-nine days, Germany did not move a million troops east in three days after victory, Britain did not send more than one million soldiers secretly at the beginning of the campaign, Brussels fell in August 1914 rather than the following year, and General Joseph Joffre commanded the French—not German—army. A stronger analysis separates Alfred von Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum from Helmuth von Moltke the Younger's 1914 deployment and asks why the campaign failed despite early German advances. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009)

The Strategic Problem Germany Tried to Solve

Germany's planners feared simultaneous war with France in the west and Russia in the east. The Franco-Russian alliance made that possibility increasingly credible, while Britain's position added further uncertainty. Germany occupied a central geographic position and could not assume that defensive war on both fronts would remain manageable indefinitely. Planners believed Russia's size and railway limitations would make full mobilization slower than France's. The strategic concept was therefore sequential: concentrate most available strength in the west, defeat France before Russia became fully effective, and then shift forces east by rail. The plan depended less on a magical timetable than on creating a temporary superiority before the coalition could use its combined resources. (Foley, 2005)

Schlieffen's 1905 Memorandum

Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1906, produced a memorandum in late 1905 that envisioned a massive right-wing movement through the Low Countries and northern France. German forces would avoid a costly frontal attack against French fortifications along the direct Franco-German border, sweep around the French left, pass west of Paris, and drive the French armies against their eastern defenses or the Swiss frontier. The memorandum was partly a planning

exercise and demanded more formations than Germany then possessed. Historians debate whether it was a final operational blueprint, an advocacy document for army expansion, or one stage within a continuing body of deployment planning. (Zuber, 2002; Holmes, 2014)

Why Belgium Was Central

The fortified zone between Switzerland and Luxembourg limited a direct German advance. Moving through Belgium offered wider terrain and access to the French flank. It also created a political and strategic danger. Belgium's neutrality had international guarantees, and invasion made British intervention more likely. German leaders hoped military necessity and speed would outweigh diplomatic cost, but the violation transformed the war's political meaning and gave Britain a clear reason to act. Belgium also resisted rather than allowing unobstructed passage. Fortresses, demolished infrastructure, mobilized troops, and civilian displacement slowed the advance and required forces for siege, security, and occupation. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009)

The Netherlands Question

Schlieffen's memorandum included movement through the Netherlands, which would provide additional space and routes around Belgian defenses. Moltke's 1914 deployment avoided Dutch territory. Preserving a neutral Netherlands protected a channel for trade and reduced the number of enemies, but it narrowed the German advance through Belgium and created logistical congestion. The decision was not the single cause of failure. It illustrates the difference between an abstract sweep on a map and an executable plan constrained by diplomacy, roads, railways, supply, and force availability. (Zuber, 2002; Foley, 2005)

Moltke's Inheritance

Helmuth von Moltke the Younger became chief of the General Staff after Schlieffen. He inherited a series of plans rather than one untouched document. He adjusted force allocations, strengthened sectors in Alsace-Lorraine and the east, and planned within the army Germany actually possessed. Popular accounts often claim that Moltke fatally "weakened" a perfect right wing. The reality is more complicated. Schlieffen's ideal already required immense strength, and Germany had legitimate concerns about French attack in the south and Russian action in East Prussia. The question is not whether Moltke changed the plan—every plan changes—but whether the final allocation left sufficient combat power and command flexibility for the decisive western maneuver. (Zuber, 2002; Holmes, 2014)

Railway Mobilization

Germany's railway network allowed rapid mobilization and concentration. Detailed schedules moved reservists, horses, ammunition, food, and equipment toward deployment areas. Railways gave planners confidence that forces could later be transferred east. Their advantage ended near the advancing front. Once armies crossed into Belgium and France, rail lines had to be repaired, converted to German use, protected, and extended operationally. Troops increasingly depended on roads, horse-drawn transport, and marching. Railway excellence could deliver armies to the frontier; it could not guarantee food, ammunition, medical evacuation, and command support hundreds of kilometers beyond it. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009)

The Mathematics of the Right Wing

The German right wing had to cover extraordinary distances while maintaining contact among armies, protecting flanks, besieging fortresses, and guarding communications. Marching speed was limited by the slowest elements, congestion, weather, fatigue, and the need to fight. As the arc widened, the front expanded and density decreased. Units lost men through combat, sickness, exhaustion, and detached duties. A plan that relied on overwhelming mass at the outer wing faced a geometric problem: the farther it advanced, the more territory and roads it had to control. The French, retreating toward their own rail network, could shorten communications while the Germans lengthened theirs. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009)

French Plan XVII

France entered the war with Plan XVII, which emphasized concentration and offensive action, particularly toward Alsace and Lorraine. French attacks there suffered heavy losses. These failures initially supported German expectations by drawing French forces east and allowing the German right to advance through Belgium. Yet French command was able to recognize danger, dismiss ineffective leaders, redirect formations, and create a new army near Paris. The French plan failed in its opening offensive, but the French army did not collapse. Operational adaptation became more important than the quality of the original deployment concept. (Herwig, 2009)

Belgian Resistance

Belgian forces could not defeat the German armies alone, but resistance imposed delay and friction. The forts around Liège required heavy artillery and specialized assault. Demolished bridges and railways complicated movement. German occupation policies and atrocities against civilians intensified international hostility and further undermined political legitimacy. The delay should not be exaggerated as the sole explanation for the Marne, but it reduced the margin in a campaign already

dependent on speed. Belgium also denied Germany the assumption that a small neutral state could be treated merely as empty space. (Herwig, 2009)

Britain's Entry and the British Expeditionary Force

Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914, following the invasion of Belgium and the wider European crisis. The initial British Expeditionary Force was a relatively small professional army, not a secret force of more than one million men. Its numbers were limited compared with the mass continental armies, but its training and fire discipline made it significant at Mons and during the retreat. British participation also had long-term importance because the empire could mobilize financial, naval, industrial, colonial, and human resources. German planning had not adequately solved the political consequence of turning Britain into an active enemy. (Herwig, 2009)

Russian Mobilization and East Prussia

German planners expected Russia to mobilize slowly, but Russian forces entered East Prussia earlier than the western timetable comfortably allowed. The threat produced anxiety and contributed to the transfer of corps and a cavalry division from the west. Those units did not determine the German victory at Tannenberg and arrived too late to influence its decisive phase. Whether their absence caused failure at the Marne remains debated. The transfer mattered because it reduced available strength and reflected strategic pressure, but German armies in the west still possessed substantial power. The larger problem was that the two-front war was already becoming simultaneous rather than sequential. (Showalter, 2010; Herwig, 2009)

Command Structure and Communication

Moltke attempted to direct several armies across a broad front with limited radio, telephone, and messenger capability. Communications were slow, interrupted, and vulnerable. Army commanders possessed significant autonomy and interpreted changing circumstances differently. Headquarters often lacked an accurate, current picture of positions, enemy strength, and gaps. Orders could arrive after conditions had changed. The plan required coordinated wheeling and mutual support, yet the command system struggled to synchronize armies moving on separate roads while fighting daily engagements. (Herwig, 2009)

Kluck's Turn East of Paris

General Alexander von Kluck's First Army formed the outer German right. As the campaign developed, Kluck turned southeast and passed east rather than west of Paris. The movement responded to the retreating French and the operational situation but exposed the army's right flank to

forces gathering around Paris. It also contributed to a gap between the First and Second Armies. The change did not mean commanders forgot the map; it showed that pursuit, enemy resistance, supply, and neighboring movements had altered the conditions assumed by the original encirclement concept. (Herwig, 2009)

French Adaptation Under Joffre

General Joseph Joffre, the French commander in chief, reorganized the defense after the frontier battles. He transferred forces from the east using the French railway system, replaced commanders, and established the Sixth Army near Paris under Michel-Joseph Maunoury. The French retreat preserved forces rather than allowing them to be enveloped. Military governor Joseph Gallieni recognized the opportunity presented by Kluck's exposed flank and pressed for attack. France's ability to move troops internally demonstrated that railways were not an exclusively German advantage. (Herwig, 2009)

The Battle of the Marne

Beginning in early September 1914, French and British forces counterattacked along the Marne. The French Sixth Army struck Kluck's flank, while the British Expeditionary Force and French Fifth Army advanced toward the gap between the German First and Second Armies. German formations were exhausted and communications were uncertain. Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch, sent by German headquarters to assess the armies, supported retreat when he concluded that the position was dangerous. The Germans withdrew to the Aisne. France had not been defeated, and the western campaign shifted toward entrenched warfare. (Herwig, 2009)

Logistical Exhaustion

By the Marne, German troops had marched and fought for weeks. Supply columns struggled to keep pace, horses weakened, and units became separated from depots. Food and ammunition distribution were uneven. Wounded soldiers and prisoners added transport burdens. Operational plans often treat movement as arrows, but armies consume enormous resources each day. Speed itself increased exhaustion. The German advance succeeded tactically in many places yet reduced the physical capacity needed for the final encirclement. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009)

Intelligence and Misreading the Enemy

German planners and commanders underestimated the ability of France to recover from early defeats and redeploy. They also expected political shock and operational maneuver to produce collapse before coalition resources accumulated. Intelligence could identify movements imperfectly, while

assumptions shaped interpretation. French retreat was sometimes read as disintegration when it was also creating strategic depth. A plan becomes dangerous when every enemy action is interpreted as confirmation rather than as new evidence requiring revision. (Herwig, 2009)

The Role of French and British Fighting

Explanations that focus only on German mistakes understate Allied agency. Belgian resistance imposed costs, French armies absorbed losses and reorganized, British troops fought and maintained cohesion, and commanders exploited the opening near Paris. Germany did not merely fail against a timetable; opponents made choices that defeated the intended sequence. War plans concern interaction with an enemy who is actively trying to disrupt them, not execution against a fixed schedule. (Herwig, 2009)

Was There One Schlieffen Plan?

Historical debate challenges the popular image of a single master plan weakened by Moltke. Some historians emphasize continuity between Schlieffen's concept and 1914 operations. Others argue that the 1905 memorandum was not the definitive executable plan later imagined and that German planning included several possibilities. This debate matters because it changes the lesson. If a perfect plan existed, failure can be blamed on alteration. If the plan was an evolving concept built on unrealistic force and political assumptions, the failure lies deeper in German strategy. (Zuber, 2002; Holmes, 2014)

Why the Plan Failed

The failure resulted from interacting causes: the ambitious distance and force requirements of the right-wing sweep; Belgian resistance; British entry; faster-than-expected Russian action; detachments and competing priorities; long supply lines; fatigue; weak high-level communication; divergence among army movements; French adaptation; Allied counterattack; and the gap between the German First and Second Armies. No one decision explains the outcome completely. Even if additional formations had remained on the right, logistics and command would still have limited their use. Conversely, the campaign came close enough to Paris that tactical and command choices mattered. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009; Showalter, 2010)

Strategic Consequences

Failure at the Marne ended the prospect of a quick western victory. Both sides attempted to outflank one another in the "Race to the Sea," and a continuous trench system developed from the North Sea toward Switzerland. Germany now faced the prolonged two-front war its planners had hoped to avoid.

Industrial production, blockade, manpower, alliance management, and attrition became decisive. The plan's failure therefore shaped not only one battle but the form of the First World War. (Herwig, 2009)

Lessons for Military Planning

The Schlieffen case shows that operational brilliance cannot compensate for flawed political assumptions. Violating Belgian neutrality solved a geographic problem while creating a powerful enemy and moral cost. Detailed mobilization schedules can produce rigidity if leaders confuse preparation with prediction. Logistics must be planned beyond the railhead, and command systems must function across distance and uncertainty. Most importantly, plans need branches and alternatives because the enemy will not cooperate. Speed is valuable only when the force remains supplied, informed, and capable of concentration at the decisive point. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009)

Conclusion

The Schlieffen concept attempted to solve Germany's two-front dilemma by defeating France before Russia's full power could be brought to bear. Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum envisioned a vast right-wing sweep through the Low Countries, while Moltke's 1914 deployment adapted that concept to political, geographic, and force constraints. Germany mobilized efficiently and advanced rapidly, but the campaign depended on optimistic assumptions about Belgium, Britain, Russia, French collapse, logistics, and command coordination. Belgian resistance, British intervention, Russian pressure, extended supply lines, troop exhaustion, communication failures, Kluck's movement east of Paris, and French adaptation under Joffre created the conditions for the Allied counterattack at the Marne. The plan did not fail because France surrendered too slowly or because one timid general removed a million men. It failed because an inflexible strategy met active enemies, finite resources, and a political reality that its operational geometry could not control. (Foley, 2005; Herwig, 2009; Zuber, 2002)

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