

War Academies and War Plans

Despite Helmuth von Moltke the Elder's sage counsel that no plan of military operations could extend accurately beyond the first serious contact with an enemy, both German and French army planners ignored that advice by meticulously planning large scale and lengthy operations in the belief that *the first nation to get its troops into the chosen field / location would win any pending conflict.*

Thus it was in the years preceding the Great War that the French and Germans war academies had prepared completely opposite plans. In each case however they relied as much on speed of initial movement as on the strength of their respective armies, because each side feared being second to implement its plan.

The German Schlieffen Plan

The architect of the 1870 victory General Helmuth von Moltke realised that the new German nation state faced possible wars on two fronts - against both France and Russia.

Initially it was thought that the German army could deal with both adversaries at the same time. However after the construction of the Séré de Rivières fortresses along France's new frontier with Germany, sentiment changed to dealing with Russia first. Prussia/Germany had healed its wounds with Austria-Hungary and this gave them greater military stability on their eastern borders.

In 1891 Field Marshal Alfred Graf von Schlieffen was appointed Chief of the German Great General Staff (OHL) and would observe a number of events that would change German military doctrine.

To the west France was still seething for revenge. School children learnt in their history lessons that it was their duty to avenge the national disgrace of the loss of the 1871 Franco- Prussian War. The III Republic was preparing itself for the day when the lost provinces of Alsace & Lorraine would be returned to the mother nation.

To the east, France's new ally, Russia, would be a force to be reckoned with, if it was given the time to mobilise its huge but poorly equipped army.

From a German perspective the border with France, now protected by the Séré de Rivières fortresses, suggested that a quick victory against France would prove difficult, and by attacking France first this action would bring in the Russians. Russia however had the space to be able to retire in front of the German army, giving the French time to mount a possible offensive.

Schlieffen figured that France would be swift to mobilise and Russia would be slow – therefore France had to be dealt with first.

In December 1905 von Schlieffen finally decided that pounding the forts to dust was out of the question and the answer lay in violating Belgian neutrality.

Under the plan developed by von Schlieffen almost all of the German strength (four armies) would swing across Belgium and Luxembourg, before entering France via Flanders in the north. In this manoeuvre an attack on the line of French border forts to the south would be avoided.

By the 22nd day of mobilisation, German forces would be on the Franco Belgian frontier. A week later it would be approaching the Somme and ready to swing around the back of Paris before turning east.

Along the Franco German border, where it was hoped that the French might try and seize back the lost territories, they would play a holding game with just 5 infantry Corps and 3 of cavalry. They would allow the French to advance into Germany and across the Rhine if necessary as the giant lid on the box closed behind them. The further the French were distanced from Paris the greater their disaster.

The French forces would be crushed in a huge pincer movement on Day 42.

Just six weeks to deal with France before turning east to deal with Russia. It should be noted that these timings referred to the day of mobilisation and not the declaration of any war, which came afterwards.

Von Schlieffen insisted to his dying day in 1913 that the right wing of the German force had to be as strong as possible if success was to be had.



He had doubts though. This was a period when soldiers would still be required to march great distances over broken ground on foot. Thousands of troop trains were organised to get them to their starting lines but from there the advance would be governed by how far a man could march and fight day after day. Those out on the right wing (1st Army) would be required to march 450 kilometres to pass through Belgium, come in behind Paris and then fight the greater part of the French forces.

The essential objective of the Schlieffen plan was not to gain territory or capture Paris, but to crush the French army within six weeks. Only then could Germany turn eastwards and deal with the Russians.

In 1906 Germany had a new Chief of Staff, Graf Helmuth von Moltke nephew of the vanquisher of the French in 1870. He is thus known to history as *von Moltke the younger*.

By 1914 his battle plans were drawn up and they differed importantly from the Schlieffen plan. It was now thought that the French would use a much greater force against Alsace, and to counter that possibility Moltke reduced his strength on the right wing and bolstered the units in Alsace Lorraine.

Five German armies (52 divisions + 7 of cavalry corps) would form the Schlieffen hammer passing through Belgium pivoting on the town of Thionville. Although a number of Belgian fortresses would have to be dealt with, new super heavy guns manufactured by Krupp and Skoda were considered capable of the task.

Facing the French along their common frontier two German armies would not only buffer any French attack but would also advance into France.

The French Plan XVII

Whilst von Schlieffen was putting his plan of attack together the French High Command was likewise preparing for a war with Germany.



Ecole de Guerre – The French War College

Just before the turn of the century Plan XIV (the 14th plan since 1875) based itself on the imposing system of fortresses that General Séré de Rivières had constructed along France's eastern frontier.



If the Germans attacked, the French would defend and wear them down. Although Germany was the more populous of the two nations and would therefore be able to field a larger army, the French felt they only needed to resist long enough for Russia to come to her aid. The magical figure accepted by all sides being six weeks for the Russian army to mobilise.

A dozen years later, fears were already growing that the Germans might try swinging through Belgium. It was a radical solution, but why would the Germans throw themselves against France's impregnable fortresses if they could go around them.

Under General Michel's Plan XVI it was considered prudent for France to place two thirds of the French Army along the Belgian border in readiness. This plan required placing the reservists into the front line and was thus set aside. Michel was ousted for having ideas that were considered to be bordering on the ridiculous. He was replaced by General Joseph Joffre.



In 1912 Joffre began work on Plan XVII whereby he coordinated the French rail system to bring the troops to the French German border faster than previously, as rapid 'offence' became the dominating objective, whereby the French army would quickly advance to attack the German armies at Alsace Lorraine and north of Luxembourg.

Apart from wanting to take back Alsace Lorraine, he firmly believed this to be the area where the bulk of the German forces would be concentrated.

In a nutshell: The Germans wanted the French to launch their main attacks on them in the Alsace Lorraine region, where their own border would be strongly defended by two well equipped German armies.

Meanwhile, the other five German armies under the Schlieffen plan would circumvent the heavily defended French border forts, swing through Belgium into northern France and come up behind the French armies engaged around Alsace Lorraine.

Schlieffen's crucial timeframe for the defeat of the French army was just **M+42 days** – as this period (6 weeks) was the amount of time estimated that it would take for the much larger Russian armies in the east to mobilize and relocate to begin their attack on Germany's eastern border.

The French Plan XVII basically gave the Germans what they wanted as two of their armies were directed to quickly strike into Alsace Lorraine and capture their lost territory, while another two French armies were designated to attack into German territory north of Luxembourg.

Implementation of the War Plans: What actually happened

Following their respective mobilizations and declarations of war, the German and French General Staffs implemented their respective pre-war plans.

An aerial view of the offensives by the two belligerent nations would show that they were carried out in distinctly separate regions of France & Belgium.

This then allows us to study the implementation of each plan separately.

On the 6th August the German 2nd Army crossed the Belgian border and immediately laid siege to the Belgian forts at Liege, which they had expected to quickly overrun. Initially von Bülow had attempted to take these by frontal attacks, but he was beaten off with heavy losses and was eventually forced to call up his army's heavier calibre howitzer batteries - which took time to be brought up to the front.

Just this first stand by the Belgian garrison added some five days to the German timetable (remember the warning of Moltke the Elder), and the spirited and ongoing defence by the Belgians in defence of their homeland continued to cause further delays to their critical timetable.

The French meanwhile were quick to launch two major offensives, on their southern and northern borders with Germany. Despite the Germans evident strength in front of Liège, Joffre continued to believe that the main German forces were concentrated around Metz (in Lorraine), and decided to attack there.

Battles of the Frontiers: Lorraine

On 14th August 1914 the French First and Second Armies crossed the Franco-German border into their former territories of Alsace Lorraine. Initially the Germans allowed the French to make some progress in their advance, for the purpose of drawing a significant proportion of the French troop strength away in the opposite direction to the German Armies that were advancing through Belgium.

However by 25th August the Germans had counter-attacked with the extensive use of their superior artillery, and as a consequence the French army was forced to retreat back into its own territory, while in the process it suffered thousands of casualties.

Battles of the Frontiers: Ardennes

From 21 August the French armies on the northern border attacked numerically superior German forces in the forests of the Ardennes region. The well trained Germans had selected good defensive positions in the woods in their field grey uniforms, and were well armed with heavy artillery pieces and machine guns. The attacking French soldiers were not so well-equipped, and being dressed in dark blue jackets and red pantaloon trousers, which served to highlight their positions both in wooded terrain and open countryside, the French infantry were cut down with heavy casualties and forced to retreat.

In summary, by the end of August 1914 it was becoming obvious even at that early point, that the much anticipated war that both sides had wanted was not unfolding as either had planned and imagined it would, confirming Moltke the Elder's prophetic assertion.