

## The Planning of the First World War

The war plans of the European powers are often seen as one of the causes of the First World War. This is not simply because they existed; war plans tend to be contingent – they are made in case of a war, not out of a desire to start one. Nonetheless, the war plans of the European powers assumed startling influence in the months before and after the outbreak of the war. European leaders allowed their decisions to be dictated, to a certain degree, by their war plans. Moreover, the way the French and Germans wrote their plans showed that they believed that any war would be quick and decisive and won by offensive action. In this, they epitomized a widespread belief in Europe that it was possible to win an offensive war in a short period of time; British soldiers leaving for the front in August 1914, for instance, fully believed that they would return by Christmas. None of the European powers anticipated the trench-war stalemate that quickly developed in the first weeks of the war; no one realized that each side's defensive capabilities were stronger than any offensive.

### *Background: The Franco-Prussian War*

Throughout most of the second millennium CE, the Holy Roman Empire and the French monarchy competed for the territory between them. By the end of the nineteenth century neither the Holy Roman Empire in the German lands nor the Bourbon monarchy in France had survived, but the German and French states that succeeded them continued to live in animosity. Throughout their tense history, however, the two countries had never fought as decisive a war as the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

In 1870, after years of tensions, France declared war on Prussia, which was the leading state in what would soon become Germany. The other German states joined with Prussia, however, and resisted the French. The German armies quickly proved superior to the French. In particular, they won a major victory at Sedan on September 2, 1870, in which they captured the entire French army as well as Emperor Napoleon III. The people of Paris declared a republic and continued to fight against the invaders, but after a five-month siege of Paris the Germans prevailed. The French were made to cede the border territories of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany. The treaty was signed in the Hall of Mirrors at the Versailles Palace of King Louis XIV – the ultimate symbol of French power was used to signify their embarrassing defeat.

In the end, the cession of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany was a relatively small price for France's ignominious defeat. The war had greater significance, however, in what it meant for both countries. In Germany, the war was the last war of German unification; Chancellor Otto Bismarck declared afterwards that Germany was "satisfied" and would pursue no more conquests in Europe. Rather, the German government focused on instilling German culture in all the people within its territories.

The war probably had a greater impact on France, however. The sudden and catastrophic defeat cast a shadow over the country that would remain until the outbreak of the First World War. The army, which under Napoleon had conquered most of Europe, came under great public scrutiny in the decades that followed 1870 because of the ignominious defeat. The military tried to instill in its soldiers a new *élan*, or

passionate fighting spirit, believing that the Germans had won in 1870 because they had possessed *élan* and the French had not.

The war also had much importance for the war plans that each country devised in the event of another war. Germany's striking offensive victory helped the Germans to see victory in another offensive maneuver – the Schlieffen Plan. The French, meanwhile, tried to instill in their soldiers the offensive capabilities that propelled the Germans to victory. Moreover, the recapture of Alsace and Lorraine became a national obsession for the French.

### *Germany: The Schlieffen Plan*

The Schlieffen Plan is probably the best known of the European war plans, since its outcome largely determined the course of the war. It was designed in the early 1900s by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, though over the ensuing years it was modified slightly by German generals.

First of all, the plan envisaged a situation in which Germany had to fight a war on two fronts: in the west against France, and in the east against Russia. Planning for a war on two fronts went against any advisable course of action; one of the first principles of war strategy is to fight only one enemy at a time. In this case, however, German politicians and military leaders accepted that a two-front war would be necessary because of the diplomatic situation. France and Russia had signed a secret treaty of alliance in 1892, though it became public knowledge a few years later. Schlieffen surmised that in the event of a war, the French army would mobilize quicker than the Russian army. The Russians had lost a war against Japan in 1904–05 and were considered a weak opponent. Therefore, Schlieffen believed it was essential to attack the French with speed, as the Russians would take weeks to mobilize their army properly.

The French guarded the German border closely, but Schlieffen devised a way to slip deep into French territory relatively unnoticed. The plan called for a small force of German troops to stay at the border while the main army travelled through Belgium; the Franco-Belgian border was not so closely guarded and once through it, the German army would, in theory, have a clear shot at conquering Paris. Once that was accomplished, the Germans could focus on Russia and hopefully annihilate them as well.

The Schlieffen Plan almost worked. The German army reached the outskirts of Paris before a furious counterattack pushed them back. The Germans retreated a few dozen miles before digging in, and the war's offensive beginning quickly gave way to the trench warfare that defined it.

Historians and military history buffs continue to debate the question of why the Schlieffen Plan failed. There are several possible reasons. First, the plan presumed that the Belgians would offer little resistance, but their month-long struggle enabled the French and British to mobilize and defend Paris. Second, the Germans believed that Britain would not enter the war. The British had signed an alliance with Belgium in 1839 that guaranteed Belgian neutrality, and the Germans were shocked that the British would go to war over a "scrap of paper," as the German ambassador in London called it.

Indeed, British participation in the war was hardly assured. In the years preceding the First World War, their allies, the French, also worried that Britain would not live up to its commitments. The British had always preferred to stay out of European affairs if possible, and it surprised many that they did not elect to do so in 1914.

Third, the Schlieffen Plan did not anticipate the vigor of the French counterattack and the deficiencies in the German plan. In particular, the French had an excellent railway system that enabled them to get troops to the front quickly. The Germans, however, suffered from a number of logistical difficulties when they reached France. Their advance had been too fast; the men and the horses were exhausted, and many of their supplies were far behind them by the time they approached Paris.

### *France: Plan XVII*

The French plan for war against Germany also relied on the offensive spirit that characterized the German plans. Unlike the Schlieffen Plan, which the Germans developed in the decade before the outbreak of the war, Plan XVII had existed in some form or another since after the Franco-Prussian War. Its goal, simply put, was to recapture Alsace-Lorraine and right the wrong done to France in the Franco-Prussian War.

While considering the French war plans, we should also consider their overall view of the potential conflict. The diplomatic situation before the war was very much a guessing game; each country was trying to decipher how the others would act, and then plan accordingly. French generals believed that the Germans would not dare invade Belgium and risk bringing Britain into the war. The French may have wondered if Britain would enter the war in a direct German attack on France, but they assumed that the Germans would not challenge the British because of their treaty with Belgium. Only in 1914 did the French begin to worry that the Germans might attack through Belgium, and these worries came too late to move enough troops to the border to slow down the Germans.

This point leads into an explanation of the main French defense against German invasion: alliances. After the Franco-Prussian War, the French carefully pursued alliances with Russia and Great Britain, respectively an authoritarian monarchy and their historic enemy. That the French would pursue such alliances shows how much they feared the possibility that Germany might invade again.

The French plan to recapture Alsace and Lorraine was relatively simple. Four armies would invade the two captured provinces. Two armies would turn south and capture the provinces, while the other two would turn north to meet the German counterattack. The French believed that their offensive spirit would help them to victory.

They did not achieve the result they expected. Shortly after the war started, the French general staff implemented Plan XVII, which was easily repelled by German defensive forces. The French were only able to retake Alsace and Lorraine when they and their allies defeated the Germans in 1918.

## *The Other Powers*

The other European powers that entered the First World War in 1914 – Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Great Britain – had varying degrees of readiness for the war. Of these three, Russia was the most ready for the conflict that occurred, and its war plans were perhaps the most realistic. The Russian war plan assumed that Germany would attack France first and then turn to Russia. The plan then stipulated that Russia would attack Germany's eastern flank before the Germans could defend it adequately. When the Russians carried out the plan, however, a depleted German army repelled the initial Russian advance. Earlier Russian plans had allowed for the likelihood that the Germans would take some territory from Russia while the country mobilized. These plans also understood that Russia had so many people that it could withstand heavy casualties. This proved to be Russia's strategy through much of the war, but the death toll eventually played a major part in the fall of the Russian monarchy in 1917.

Austria-Hungary, however, did not plan for a major European war at all. Rather, the Austrians only made plans to invade Serbia. The plan they chose when they went to war with Serbia in August 1914 was to send two armies into Serbia and four to guard against Russian help for the Serbs. While the Austrians eventually won a bitter war against the Serbs, they fared far worse in the general war – the Russians won such significant victories against the Austrians in 1914 and 1915 that the German army essentially took over the Austrian army.

Finally, the British made no plans to enter a European war. Though they were secretly allied with the French and the Russians, it was uncertain that Britain would come to its allies' defense in the event of war. For centuries, British foreign policy had been to avoid involvement in continental European politics unless it was to ensure that one country did not become too powerful. In the years after the Franco-British alliance was signed, the British spent much time reassuring the French that this time Britain would choose to get involved. When the Germans invaded Belgium, the British cabinet held several tense, hurried meetings to determine whether Britain should defend France. When the cabinet decided to enter the war, it was generally believed that it would be a short, glorious war. The troops were assured that they would be home by Christmas. No one on any side had planned for the senseless slaughter that ensued.

### *Summary*

- In the Franco-Prussian War, Germany defeated France and took the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine as a reward. While the Germans reveled in their newfound power and eventually prepared a plan for another quick invasion, the French obsessed about the German threat.
- Germany's Schlieffen Plan proposed an invasion of France through Belgium before turning to face Russia. The plan almost succeeded, but a number of factors, including Belgian and French resistance, caused it to fail and created the conditions for the stalemate that followed.
- France's Plan XVII called for an invasion to retake Alsace and Lorraine from Germany. The spirited efforts of the French troops were supposed to carry the army

to victory, but when the plan was carried out in 1914 the Germans turned the French away easily.

- Russia's war plan called for an invasion of Germany's eastern border while the German army was engaged in fighting France. This plan also failed, as the Russian army was not strong enough to break through the German lines.
- Neither Austria-Hungary nor Great Britain foresaw a world war. Austria-Hungary was prepared only for an invasion of Serbia, while the British never fully decided that they should enter a European war until they actually did so.