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### *A Critical Review of the Schlieffen Plan*

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#### ABSTRACT/RÉSUMÉ

This essay provides a critical examination of the Schlieffen Plan, Germany's offensive strategy in World War I. It outlines four of the most important flaws with the plan and the reasons why it had little chance of success. These include the dismissal of the consequences resulting from the violation of Belgian neutrality; the absence of adequate transportation networks for German armies in Belgium and France; the underestimation of the mobilization speed of the Russians; and lastly, the potential for opposition from the Belgians under occupation. As a result of these errors in judgement, the Schlieffen Plan was essentially doomed to failure from its initiation in 1914.

#### *Introduction*

Over the course of the past century, Germany's World War I offensive strategy, the Schlieffen Plan, has been studied and critiqued by countless military historians and several different interpretations have resulted. One of the prevailing schools of thought has been that the Schlieffen Plan was, from its very conception, doomed to failure. There are several different postulations for this point of view, including its lack of political considerations, such as respecting Belgian neutrality; the lack of sufficient transportation networks for German armies in Belgium and France; the inadequate amount of troops left to defend eastern Germany against the Russians; the underestimation of Russian mobilization speed; and finally, the potential resistance posed by the Belgians. On account of these deficiencies, some historians have contended that the plan's creator, Alfred von Schlieffen, was naïve, narrow-minded, and ill-suited for the post of Chief of the General Staff. In contrast to the historians who claim that Schlieffen's plan was ruined by the inept execution by Hellmuth von Moltke, the detractors of the Schlieffen Plan assert that it never should have come as close to success as it did.<sup>1</sup> It seems clear that regardless of who had executed the Schlieffen Plan in 1914, a decisive strategic defeat of the French was not attainable. There were simply too many complications and difficulties that arose during its implementation. Although it may have been tactically

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip M. Flammer, "The Schlieffen Plan and Plan XVII: A Short Critique," *Military Affairs* 30 (1966-1967): 207-212, online via JSTOR, <[www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org)> (16 March 2007).

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sound, the plan failed to account for the important issues listed above and ultimately failed as a war strategy.

The first major issue of contention with the plan is its blatant disregard for the 1839 Treaty of London, which guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium. According to the treaty, Germany was committed to upholding the independence of Belgium and the inviolability of its borders. However, according to von Schlieffen's writings, the Low Countries were an irresistible avenue for encircling the French army and quickly eliminating it as a military threat. Initially he called for an invasion of the Netherlands as well, but this was subsequently discarded by his successor von Moltke. Regardless, following their defeat in 1871 to the Germans, the French had focused solely on reclaiming the territory that they had lost in the Treaty of Frankfurt. Thus they anticipated another war with Germany and had developed a strong defensive line on the French-German border, comprised of several large fortresses. Von Schlieffen recognized that a German army pushing through Champagne and the Ardennes would be forced to confront the major defensive line of the fortresses Belfort, Épinal, Toul, and Verdun. Following them would be several subsidiary fortified defensive positions. Under normal circumstances these objectives would be difficult to bypass and even harder to capture. But to complicate matters further, it seemed probable to the German military command that the French would concentrate the bulk of their army on the eastern border for a push into Lorraine, Alsace, and the German Rhineland. Up against a strong defensive position and an army eager for revenge, von Schlieffen logically concluded that attacking this position would be difficult and foolish.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, he needed another way to take the initiative and outflank the French armies. It was important to retain freedom of action and not be bound to engagements that were chosen by the French.<sup>3</sup>

In order to achieve this aim, von Schlieffen decided that the German Army "*must not shrink from violating the neutrality of Belgium as well as of Luxembourg*".<sup>4</sup> The invasion of Belgian territory would provide the Germans with a bold offensive plan, which would assure them of the initiative and ideally trap the French before they could manoeuvre out of the trap.<sup>5</sup> While this made perfect sense militarily, the political consequences of such an action were significant. However it appears that von Schlieffen never took the implications seriously enough to reconsider his plan of action. His only

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen, "Memorandum of 1905: The Schlieffen Plan," in *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*, trans. and ed. Robert T. Foley (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 165.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, (London: Oswald Wolff Publishers, 1958), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ritter, 41.

<sup>5</sup> Flammer, 208.

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concern was its military effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> According to his 1905 memorandum, von Schlieffen declared that the violation of Luxembourg's neutrality would have no important consequences aside from political complaints that would be easily ignored.<sup>7</sup> And although he was aware that the Belgians might resist a German invasion, he made no mention of the possible geopolitical effects that would result. He failed to address two major issues: firstly, the reaction of other neutral states to Germany's intransigence in Belgium and Luxembourg; and secondly, the possible attitude taken by the United Kingdom. Retrospectively, this second consideration was of the utmost importance, as Britain's entrance into the war in 1914 proved to be decisive in tipping the scales in favour of the Entente.

In the days before Germany invaded Belgium, it seemed likely that the British would keep out of the war. There was a strong non-interventionist political lobby in Britain and they strongly opposed committing Great Britain to a continental affair. According to Winston Churchill, three-quarters of the governing Cabinet was staunchly non-interventionist.<sup>8</sup> They had spent their political careers campaigning for armament reductions, pursuing peace, and rejecting any participation in a war fought on behalf of Russia and France.<sup>9</sup> There was little support for war unless Britain's own interests were threatened. Thus the British government was of the opinion that so long as Germany did not invade Belgium and did not send its fleet into the English Channel to attack the French coast, then Britain would remain uninvolved.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, a German invasion of Belgium would strain pro-German feeling in Britain to the limit and provide a justification for British entrance into the war. The British were in a tight spot, with few options. As a result of previous agreements with France, the French Navy had been concentrated in the Mediterranean Sea, leaving Britain's Royal Navy to protect French ports on the northern coast. Without British involvement, the French coast would be defenceless. Britain's strategic considerations rendered it imperative that the Germans not occupy French coastal ports so close to Britain's shore. The same applied to the Belgian deep-water ports of Antwerp and Zeebrugge. If Germany was able to acquire these harbours, it would be able to threaten the British mainland with invasion. This was unacceptable to British politicians, militarists, and citizens alike. When the invasions of Luxembourg and then Belgium were reported in Britain, the political credibility of the non-interventionists was diminished. They frantically looked for some way out of

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<sup>6</sup> Flammer, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Schlieffen, "Memorandum of 1905: The Schlieffen Plan," 165.

<sup>8</sup> William Jannen Jr., *The Lions of July* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1996), 332.

<sup>9</sup> Jannen Jr., 326.

<sup>10</sup> Jannen Jr., 327.

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committing to war, but reluctantly accepted that British involvement was now inevitable. Although they would not have been able to tell their constituents in good conscience that they had voted for war in order to aid the French in a war of revenge against the Germans, the invasion of Belgium gave them a *fait accompli* that necessitated military action.<sup>11</sup>

It appears clear that without the essential justification provided by Germany's invasion of Belgium, Great Britain would have remained uncommitted to the war on the continent and thereby considerably increased the prospects of German victory. Without Britain's participation, there would have been no British Expeditionary Force to meet the German First Army at Mons, a battle that would prove critical to the outcome of the war, as it delayed the advance of the all-important right wing of the German attacking forces; there would have been no naval blockade of Germany, an action that arguably played a greater role in Germany's defeat than any other; and without British involvement in the war, there would have been very little chance of the United States, a nation of immense industrial strength and manpower, becoming involved. Therefore it is reasonable to contend that von Schlieffen's failure to account for the political ramifications of his proposed plan of attack played a very significant role in Germany's defeat. His decision to send the German Armies through Belgium and Luxembourg ultimately hindered the German war effort and the military advantages did not offset the negative consequences resulting therefrom. This was clearly a major failing of the Schlieffen Plan.

Another issue that is often singled out in critiques of the Schlieffen Plan is its complete abandonment of eastern Germany and the underestimation of the time required by the Russians to mobilize their forces and launch an invasion of the province of East Prussia. When von Schlieffen was charged with developing a plan for conducting a two-front war against both Russia and France, he stated that the best possible course of action was to focus entirely on the French, whom he perceived as a far greater threat, and then after decisively defeating them, to send the Army east against an inferior Russian force that would likely have just begun its march towards Germany. Von Schlieffen held a dismissive view of the Russian Army, in large part due to its performance in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, precisely when he was formulating his attack strategy. In a letter to the German Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow reporting on the performance of the Russians, von Schlieffen was ruthless in his criticism. He asserted that it had long been known that the Russian Army lacked any significant leaders or officers and that the training of its soldiers was abysmal. He further declared that the common Russian soldier had degenerated into a state of defiance and complacency. He then summarized the state of the Russian Army:

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<sup>11</sup> Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Great War* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 33.

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The East Asian war has shown that the Russian army is less competent than had been assumed previously by informed opinion and that the war has worsened the Russian army rather than made it more efficient. It has lost all complaisance, all confidence and all obedience... It is very questionable whether or not an improvement will take place... Recent history would suggest that the Russian army will not improve, but instead will grow more ineffective.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly von Schlieffen was not impressed with the performance of the Russian military and this influenced his decisions when formulating the Schlieffen Plan. He clearly did not fear that the Russians would pose a serious threat before Germany had successfully disposed of France in the west. And in the event that the Russians were able to commit a considerable force before the Germans were ready, it was assumed that the armies of the Austro-Hungarian Empire would be able to contain them.<sup>13</sup> Naturally, due to the vast numerical superiority of the Russian forces, the holding strategy could only last for a limited period. Thus, time was a matter of utmost importance and a battle of annihilation had to be pursued against the French immediately. Von Schlieffen allocated forty days from mobilization for a decisive decision to be reached. After this period of time had expired, the opportunity to defeat France before the Russians could become involved would be lost.

To achieve this objective, he called for seven-eighths of the total German forces to be deployed on the western front, with the strongest armies, 1, 2 and 3, arrayed between Luxembourg and Aachen, and three lighter armies, 4, 5, and 6, south of Luxembourg. These forces would swing through the Netherlands and Belgium and encircle the French forces. A further two armies would remain on the Rhine river, attempting to draw the French forces further east into Germany, to assist the trap.<sup>14</sup> With so many forces concentrated against France, only one army would be sent to the east, to perform a holding action against Russian incursions. They would be required to impede the Russian advance until troops from the west could be transferred. This left East Prussia effectively defenceless, which was unacceptable to the majority of German society. Nevertheless, von Schlieffen insisted that the poor quality of Russian soldiers, their

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen, "Reports on the Russian Army, 1905," in *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*, trans. and ed. Robert T. Foley (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 160-161.

<sup>13</sup> Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 203.

<sup>14</sup> Bucholz, 209.

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ineffective leadership, their lengthy mobilization times, and the German ability to utilize the terrain to advantage would forestall a catastrophic event on the eastern front.

However in 1914, when World War I began, the situation in the east had changed notably from 1905 when von Schlieffen had made his assessment of the Russian threat. In the nine years since the Russo-Japanese War, the Russians had worked diligently to improve their military capability and had successfully thrown off the stigma of their recent defeat. The whole country was eager for war and the chance to redeem their honour. When the French ambassador to Petrograd described the mood in Russia, he stated that:

Everywhere... the same popular demonstrations, the same grave and religious enthusiasm, the same impulse to rally around the Tsar, the same faith in victory, the same exultation of the national conscience. No opposition, no dissentient voice. The bad days of 1905 seem to have gone from the memory of all. The collective soul of Holy Russia has never manifested itself so forcibly since 1812.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly Russia was ready and willing to engage the Germans. This risk was further increased when the French and Russian governments began to coordinate their plans for military cooperation in case of war. This agreement committed the Russians to begin their attack in the east as quickly as possible, to help alleviate pressure on the French. And moreover, the Russian rail lines in the areas of Poland and Belarus had been significantly improved since 1905. In fact, since 1870 railroad construction in Russia had increased by five hundred and thirty one percent, compared to only three hundred and twelve percent in Germany.<sup>16</sup> And within the last few years before the war, a major construction program had begun which “*greatly enhanced Russia’s military capabilities along the German and Austrian borders*”.<sup>17</sup> As a result Russia’s mobilization times were considerably shortened, posing a much greater threat and a major flaw in von Schlieffen’s planning. Thus, von Moltke was no longer able to ignore the eastern front as von Schlieffen had. The risk had grown too great and von Moltke felt compelled to boost the number of troops stationed in the east to combat the Russians.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Bucholz, 306.

<sup>17</sup> Bucholz, 263.

<sup>18</sup> Annika Mombauer, “Of War Plans and War Guilt: The Debate Surrounding the Schlieffen Plan,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28 (2005): 857-885, online via Taylor and Francis Group, <<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/>> (16 March 2007).

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In August of 1914 his caution was vindicated. Although the German General Staff had calculated that Russian mobilization would take a minimum of six weeks, after only two weeks of war, eastern Germany had been invaded by not just one, but two full-sized Russian armies.<sup>19</sup> Clearly even the troops that General von Moltke had transferred from the west and assigned to the east before the war would not be enough to counter such a large menace. This caused panic at the German headquarters. Von Moltke was caught in a very difficult situation. Evidently the Schlieffen Plan and its subsequent revisions had underestimated Russia's strength and efficiency. According to the war strategy, reinforcements would not be able to be sent to the east for at least another three weeks. Consequently, von Moltke was faced with the decision either to pull troops from the armies invading France and Belgium, which would certainly sap their already insufficient numbers and reduce the chance for a quick, decisive success in the west, or resign himself to abandoning eastern Germany to the Russians. Although the latter option was likely more militarily sound, politically it would be a public relations disaster. Even if he had wanted to continue to adhere strictly to the Schlieffen Plan, word of the Russian advance was filtering into German society via tales from the thousands of refugees from the east who were increasing exponentially. They told horrifying stories of the atrocities committed by the advancing Russian masses and fuelled panic amongst the population of eastern Germany. The citizens demanded an increased army presence for their protection. Their cries were greatly aided by the powerful lobbying of a class within German society known as the Junkers. The Junkers were a landowning group of aristocrats who typically held large estates in the eastern half of Germany, known as Prussia. As a result of history, the Junkers had become quite powerful and influential, first in Prussia and subsequently Germany. This gave them a strong presence in society and they comprised a large section of the political and especially military leadership within the state. Accordingly, they were able to exert a particularly strong influence on decision-making in Germany and they demanded that their valuable estates be saved from the Russian invaders.<sup>20</sup> Many of remaining leaders were, if not Junkers, still Prussians and were loath to see their homeland ransacked.

As the Russian armies approached the symbolically important East Prussian capital of Königsberg, von Moltke was forced to act. The loss of Königsberg, a major German city and symbol of Prussian power, would have a devastating effect on public morale. More importantly, if it fell, nothing would stand in the way of the Russians marching straight to Berlin. With this in mind, von Moltke finally decided to transfer two infantry corps and one cavalry division from the right wing of the First Army in the west

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<sup>19</sup> Asprey, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Asprey, 78.

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to General Ludendorff's forces in the east.<sup>21</sup> Although Ludendorff claimed that the reinforcements were not immediately necessary, as he was launching an attack before they would arrive in East Prussia, von Moltke insisted. His reasoning was that the battles in the west were going favourably and it appeared that victory would soon be reached. However, all would be for nothing if the Russians were meanwhile able to occupy Berlin. There was no way for him to know that the German counter-attack led by Paul von Hindenburg and Ludendorff would be such an enormous and unexpected success. Thus he was compelled to send more troops to the east in a desperate attempt to stall the Russians before they could march into the heart of Germany.

Due to the transfer of men from the right flank of the German attacking force in the west, its ability to achieve an encirclement of the French armies was severely weakened and in the end it was unable to complete its objective. Some historians have criticized von Moltke for transferring so many troops from the western front to the eastern front. They contend that he essentially negated the whole *raison d'être* for the Schlieffen Plan. Instead, von Moltke chose to engage both fronts half-heartedly, ignoring the very essence of the plan, which was to engage one enemy at a time, with full strength. However, this criticism, while perhaps accurate in its assessment of the military considerations, is unfair because it ignores the mitigating factors involved in von Moltke's decision. At the onset of World War I, the military situation was drastically different than in 1905. The Russian Empire was a much greater threat than had been assumed by von Schlieffen and von Moltke was simply unable to ignore the eastern front for five weeks as von Schlieffen had chosen. When faced with the realities of the situation in the east, von Moltke wisely decided that he could not risk allowing a full-fledged Russian invasion to go unchecked. Regardless of the importance of defeating the French swiftly, allowing the Russians to march through Germany to Berlin could conceivably cost Germany the war and render any victories in the west meaningless.

A third aspect of the Schlieffen Plan that deserves critiquing is its disregard for the strength and determination of the Belgian Army when faced with invasion. Although Belgium was a permanently neutral state, it still possessed a standing army which, although small, was well-trained and modernized. Moreover they had always been aware of the potential threat to their independence posed by both Germany and France. Thus they had gone to great lengths to improve their defences, by creating "*great routes along the Maas and the Sambre with concrete and armoured works and have erected an impregnable bulwark around Antwerp behind this line*".<sup>22</sup> Most importantly, the Belgians

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<sup>21</sup> Asprey, 79.

<sup>22</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen, "War Today, 1909," in *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*, trans. and ed. Robert T. Foley (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 203.

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had heavily fortified the city of Liège in eastern Belgium near the German border. This city was situated directly on the main rail line leading from Germany through Brussels and on to Paris. It was essential for transporting the invading German armies into France and therefore it was an imperative piece of von Schlieffen's plan. The fortress of Liège had to be conquered and in adequate time to facilitate the continued advance through Belgium and into France.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it was necessary for the protection of the German communication and supply lines aiding the advancing army.<sup>24</sup> However, Liège was unquestionably a stronghold that would not be easily taken. The city was defended by a ring of twelve forts that covered each other in their zone of fire. It stood as a major obstacle barring German movement through Belgium.

However, according to von Schlieffen, it was more than likely that the Belgians would offer little or no resistance. In his 1905 Memorandum, von Schlieffen predicted that "*the increased claims on their resources will perhaps force the Belgians to refrain from all hostilities [and] to hand over their fortresses*".<sup>25</sup> Certainly it was his hope that the Belgians would at most offer only token resistance to the invading German armies and thereby ensure a speedy transit through the country, which would adhere to the strict timetable laid out in his plan. Similarly, in his 1911 review of the Schlieffen Plan, von Moltke concurred that quick progress would be made in Belgium and that the Germans could count on "*the somewhat inefficient Belgian forces being quickly scattered*".<sup>26</sup> Therefore, in the final version of the Schlieffen Plan initiated in August 1914, only forty-eight hours were allocated for capturing Liège and securing its rail lines.<sup>27</sup> This was an outrageously optimistic timeline for securing the submission of one of the most heavily guarded cities in Belgium. If the Belgians did in fact resist the Germans, then taking Liège in two days would be quite a feat.

As it turned out, the Belgians did choose to resist the German invasion and garrisoned Liège with 40 000 soldiers who were commanded to hold out to the very end. Immediately following the declaration of war against France on August 3rd, German troops invaded Belgium the next day. General Otto von Emmerich led three cavalry divisions and six infantry brigades to subdue the city, but they immediately met with dogged opposition from the local population. Many civilians chose to arm themselves and wage guerrilla warfare against the invaders. They were known as "*franc-tireurs*" and

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<sup>23</sup> Jannen Jr., 159.

<sup>24</sup> Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 265.

<sup>25</sup> Von Schlieffen, "Memorandum of 1905: The Schlieffen Plan," 172.

<sup>26</sup> Helmuth von Moltke, General Observations on the Schlieffen Plan by General H. Von Moltke, in Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, (London: Oswald Wolff Publishers, 1958), 166.

<sup>27</sup> Asprey, 52.

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they constantly frustrated the German advance, killing many German soldiers and generally impeding the march. The Belgians also tore up and barricaded the roads leading to Liège and demolished the bridges. Confronted with the ruined terrain and a constant threat of ambush, it took von Emmerich's men a full day's march to traverse the eighteen miles from the border to Liège. When they arrived, they were already behind schedule. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, the attack began with heavy artillery bombardments interspersed by infantry assaults. However the assaults failed to capture the city and the Germans suffered severe casualties, necessitating a call for reinforcements. Gradually the constant bombardment and the breakthrough of the cavalry to the north of the city forced the Belgian commander to come to the realization that defeat was inevitable and he called for an ordered retreat out of the city and back to the Gete River where the majority of the Belgian Army was stationed. With the city left undefended, a rapid infiltration succeeded in occupying Liège on the 7<sup>th</sup>. However, the twelve forts around Liège were still intact and prevented any opportunity for the Germans to make use of the capture of the city. As the duration of the operation grew, von Moltke grew wary. After the German 420mm heavy artillery were brought to the front, they were able to pulverize the fortresses into submission, but only after an additional eight days of bombardment.<sup>28</sup>

The siege of Liège served as an ominous warning for the General Staff in Germany and especially von Moltke. The Schlieffen Plan was a very rigid program, which required a strict timetable for it to be effective. For it to be thrown off schedule in the first days of the war was potentially a fatal setback. When this news was coupled with reports from the east that the Russians were mobilizing far more quickly than expected, panic began to grip von Moltke. The delay at Liège had allowed the Belgian army to escape to Antwerp, where it remained a threat to the flank of the German First Army. It had also given the French time to adapt their strategy to account for the German push into Belgium. Also, the French had launched an offensive into Lorraine which threatened to break through the German defences before the right-wing of the German armies could swing around and encircle the French. If they were able to break through the "anvil" of the Schlieffen Plan, then the "hammer" would be useless. Lastly, the British had been given time to prepare for the landing of their Expeditionary Force, which would further complicate the progress of the German First Army. But despite the setbacks, there were no real alternatives for the German General Staff but to push on with the plan. Everything had been staked on the quick victory and no backup plan had been developed in case of failure.<sup>29</sup> Thus the German armies continued into France, but now behind schedule and

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<sup>28</sup> Asprey, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Flammer, 208.

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without the element of surprise. Ultimately they were stalled at the Battle of the Marne and the Schlieffen Plan failed to bring about a decisive victory over France.

Due to the unexpectedly strong resistance put up by the Belgian army and its citizens, which von Schlieffen had not accounted for, the Belgians were able to slow down the German advance enough to ensure that the Germans were unable to complete their objectives on time and the whole plan unravelled. While von Schlieffen had designated two days for the capture of Liège and anticipated very little opposition from the Belgians, in practice much more time was required. This resulted in slowing the advance, threatening supply lines, damaging badly needed rail lines and roads, and necessitated the transfer of troops towards subduing the Belgian Army and the civilians engaging in guerrilla warfare. Clearly von Schlieffen committed a gross oversight when he planned the invasion of Belgium. His assessment of the ability and will of the Belgian people to resist was severely flawed and critically hindered his plan's prospects for success from the beginning. The timetable for the invasion and occupation of Belgium was unrealistic and in all probability unattainable.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the Schlieffen Plan was strategically unsound and the fact that the German offensive came as close to victory as it did is testament to the great efforts put forth by the average German soldier and their commanders.

A final criticism of the Schlieffen Plan is concerned simply with the logistics of such a large-scale invasion in such a short period of time. According to von Schlieffen's plan, approximately one million German soldiers would need to be transported through Belgium and into France quickly enough to outpace a French re-deployment to the north. These soldiers would need to be supplied and reinforced along already severely strained rail systems or otherwise everything would have to be marched on foot. Moreover, in the case that the Germans were not able to secure the enemy rail lines intact, the men of the First Army on the right flank of the offensive would be forced to march a staggering distance at a breakneck pace. This was an extremely ambitious request. And even if successful, the troops would be hard-pressed to engage the French armies effectively when they did face each other. Von Schlieffen himself admitted that "the right wing must make very great exertions"<sup>31</sup> but nevertheless he remained adamant that there was no other option and the men would simply have to adjust.

However, despite von Schlieffen's optimistic outlook, the logistical support for such an invasion was lacking. In order to transfer the German troops through Belgium, 180 fully-loaded trains for every army corps moving at nineteen miles an hour would

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<sup>30</sup> Flammer, 210.

<sup>31</sup> Flammer, 211.

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have to run continuously without interruption.<sup>32</sup> The technical planning by the General Staff was coordinated with the railway authorities and every twenty-four hours 550 trains carrying soldiers crossed the Rhine River. At one crossing point in Cologne, a train crossed the bridge every ten minutes for sixteen straight days.<sup>33</sup> However, despite the scrupulous planning by the Generals, the risks were still great, because any delay or setback could imperil the whole offensive. And the likelihood of such a setback was considerable, given the nature of war. Aside from mechanical failures, which were very likely, due to the enormous strain involved with transporting the troops, sabotage was also of great concern.

Moreover, von Schlieffen discounted Belgian resistance and thus did not seriously consider what to do in case the Germans could not capture the Belgian rail lines undamaged. He assumed that there would be no risk to their status and that the rail lines would be immediately usable for the Germans to continue the advance. However, as it turned out, the Belgians did resist and the rail lines became severely damaged in the fighting.<sup>34</sup> As a result, engineers were urgently ordered to repair what they could, but many of the rail lines could not be re-serviced in time to aid in the attack and the German armies were forced to march on foot. This fatally weakened the potential of the Schlieffen Plan. As more and more men were sent to the rail junction at Liège, the damaged rail lines limited the speed at which they could continue on their way and congestion became increasingly problematic, further amplifying the problems and delays. Over 600 000 troops were bottlenecked into a gap of only twelve miles across at the border.<sup>35</sup> Naturally, as the momentum slowed and more men were held up, the ability to supply and command the soldiers diminished. Although order was not lost, the delays were costly.

Due to the loss of much of the Belgian rail lines, the German invading armies were required to continue the advance on foot and march through Belgium and France. Under the strict timetable of the Schlieffen Plan, this was overly-ambitious and ill-advised. The sheer expanses involved meant that the First Army on the right wing would have to march an exhaustingly long distance. And for every mile that the German armies gained on their objectives, they would be lengthening the distance from their original railheads, which made reinforcing, supplying, and communicating exceedingly difficult. By the end of the advance, the German Second Army was 105 miles from its railhead and

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<sup>32</sup> Jannen, Jr. 160.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Kielmansegg, *Deutschland und der Erste Weltkrieg*, (Frankfurt a.M., 1968), 34, quoted in Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 52.

<sup>34</sup> Beckett, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Beckett, 49.

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the First Army was on average 70-80 miles from theirs.<sup>36</sup> When one considers the fact that the armies were marching fifteen miles per day, then reinforcements sent from Belgium on foot would take approximately seven days to reach the front. This was a critical hindrance to the German attack, as the French could much more easily and rapidly bring up men to bridge gaps and strengthen their divisions in order to stall the Germans.

Additionally, since the armies were moving at such a quick pace, their horse-drawn supply carts were unable to keep pace. The cavalry, supply, and transport horses were burdened with heavy loads and could not be expected to maintain the breakneck speed imposed upon the infantry. As a result, the supplies for the men fell behind the advance and the soldiers were forced to scavenge off the land, nourishing themselves on the local crops. As the distances increased, the supply lines became more thinly stretched and exceedingly vulnerable, putting the whole operation at risk.<sup>37</sup> Worse still, when the French and German armies finally engaged at the Battle of the Marne, the Germans were dangerously fatigued and in no condition to fight.<sup>38</sup> According to Hajo Holborn, even if the Germans had not lost the battle, they still would not have been able to execute the Schlieffen Plan. He contends that “their own casualties had been heavy, and after five weeks of continuous marching they were approaching the limit of their endurance.”<sup>39</sup> Thus the Germans would not have been able to continue the push around the French armies, because doing so would have exposed their flank and stretched their supply lines too thinly. Moreover, the Germans were at the end of their strength. Logistically the invasion was not adequately supplied or maintained and the speed at which Germany needed to attain its decisive victory was unrealistic.

The logistical problems presented above are for the most part inherent in any invasion, especially before the widespread adoption of motorized vehicles. When any army invades another nation, it is presented with problems of methods of transportation, overextended supply lines, resistance from guerrillas, broken lines of communication, and exhaustion. These difficulties were by no means the fault of von Schlieffen. However, his responsibility lies in the fact that his plan was too strictly bound to an untenable timetable and the objectives he called for were too ambitious for the time he allocated to the invasion. He was unrealistic about the abilities of the German soldiers, most significantly those in the right wing of the attack. The exertions demanded of them were simply too great and it is not surprising that the advance stalled before it achieved

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<sup>36</sup> Beckett, 55.

<sup>37</sup> Hajo Holborn, *A History of Modern Germany 1840-1945*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 345.

<sup>38</sup> Flammer, 211.

<sup>39</sup> Holborn 434.

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its aims. The supplies could not keep up with the rapid march of the soldiers, who were overworked, overextended, and, after five weeks of marching, severely vulnerable to a counter-attack. Thus the Schlieffen Plan was not logistically sound. The means were just not available for the rapid strike called for in von Schlieffen's proposal.

Over most of the past century, the Schlieffen Plan has been subjected to much study and inspection. Although there have been a few favourable appraisals of the plan, the majority of historians have justifiably taken a negative stance on the feasibility of the Schlieffen Plan. Gerhard Ritter, B.H. Liddell Hart, Holger Herwig, and Annika Mombauer are but a few notable names who have testified to the futility of von Schlieffen's program. In fact, due to its numerous inherent flaws, some historians, namely Terence Zuber, have contended that the Schlieffen Plan was in fact not a real war plan. He argues that the 1905 Memorandum written by von Schlieffen was just a collection of hypothetical musings, which were never intended to be put into practice as an offensive strategy. However, this school of thought is not generally accepted by the majority of historians and most still believe that the Schlieffen Plan was a real war time strategy, albeit a defective one. Certainly in retrospect it is apparent that there were several major problems involved with the Schlieffen Plan that were never properly resolved. These issues were the logistical shortcomings of launching a rapid, long-distance invasion through two hostile nations, with lengthy supply lines and overworked soldiers; the potential resistance put forward by the Belgian Army and the national population to the occupation of their country; the threat posed by quickly mobilizing and immediately aggressive Russian forces; and finally the international reaction to the violation of Belgian neutrality and the political and military consequences associated with it. All proved to be major hindrances to the proper execution of the German war effort and ultimately helped usher in Germany's eventual defeat. Evidently, the Schlieffen Plan was not an effective wartime strategy and it is justly criticized on the basis of von Schlieffen's underestimation of both the Belgian and Russian forces, his blatant disregard for the possible involvement of the British and his overly-ambitious expectations for the invading German armies which made him ignorant to everything but the most militaristic aspects of his plan. Clearly the Schlieffen Plan was a monumental failure that never held much chance for victory, barring colossal ineptitude on the side of the opposing forces.

### **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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