



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918 The Schlieffen Plan (1905)

Alfred von Schlieffen (1833-1913) had a long and distinguished military career, having fought as an officer in both the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. In 1891, he replaced Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891) as Chief of the General Staff of the German Army. Fear of a two-front war with France and Russia, particularly after France's signing of an Entente Cordiale with Great Britain in 1904, led Schlieffen to devise a military strategy against encirclement. The Schlieffen plan, as it came to be known, proposed the swift defeat of France in a scythe-like maneuver through Belgium and Holland, with the goal of cutting Paris off from the sea. The bulk of the German Army was to focus on defeating France while a much smaller contingent was to keep the slowly mobilizing Russians at bay in the east.

Schlieffen died a year before the outbreak of World War I. He was thus unable to experience the eventual failure of his famous plan. The Germans did not anticipate the strong resistance of the Belgium Army, the arrival of the British Expeditionary Forces in France, or the Russian Army's sudden advance into East Prussia. The result was a German retreat, the building of a line of trenches from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier, and a long war of attrition. Admittedly, Schlieffen's successor, Helmuth Johann Ludwig von Moltke (1848-1916), had modified plan by weakening the right wing in the west in favor of sending more troops to the east. Thus, the original version of the Schlieffen Plan was never fully implemented. In any event, Schlieffen's theories, as described in his book *Cannae*, became standard reading at military academies in Europe and the United States after WWI and are said to have influenced the German blitzkrieg doctrine in WWII.

Berlin, December 1905

War against France

In the event of a war with Germany, France will probably restrict itself to defensive measures, especially since it cannot count on effective support from Russia.

France has been preparing a military line for this purpose for quite some time, one that is to a great extent permanently fortified and whose main bases include the fortresses of Belfort, Epinal, Toul, and Verdun. This line can be adequately manned by France's large army and will be extremely difficult to attack.

An attack will not be directed against the large fortresses since victory there would require a massive siege army and a great deal of effort and time, even more so because the fortresses cannot be encircled and the attackers can only lay siege from one side. The attackers could

perhaps move against the areas between the fortresses. Two of these (Belfort-Epinal and Toul-Verdun) contain defensive forts, but these are not of any great importance. A more important consideration is that the intermediary spaces form strong natural lines, many sections deep. The large fortresses on their flanks will prevent attackers from carrying out an enveloping maneuver, and the attackers themselves must fear encirclement.

An attack on the right flank of the Mosel fort (Fort Ballon de Servance) offers the best prospects for success. Yet insufficient preparations have been made to overcome the difficult terrain. Even if these preparations are successful, Germany will hardly want to open a campaign with a siege of "Ballon de Servance," though it may be important to take this fort in a later stage of the war.

An attack on Nancy also offers prospects for success. The city is protected primarily by field fortifications and will be easy to encircle and shell. Once the city and the elevated position behind it (Forêt de Haye) have been taken, the attackers will encounter the fortifications of Toul. Practically the only advantage to attacking Nancy is that – in order to save Lorraine's capital – the French will perhaps be lured out of their fortifications to fight a battle in the field. Even so, their protective lines are so close behind them that defeat would not cause them serious harm or bring the victor any great success. It would be a defeated sortie from out of a fortress, and it would cause the besieger and the defender the same losses and not alter the situation.

Thus a frontal attack on the Belfort-Verdun line offers little chance of success. An enveloping maneuver to the south would have to be preceded by a victorious campaign against Switzerland and a defeat of the Jura fortresses. This undertaking would be time-consuming, and the French would not remain idle while German forces were thus engaged.

To protect against encirclement from the north, the French intend to take up positions between Verdun and Mézières on the Meuse River; yet, there are reports that they will not put up actual resistance there but rather behind the Aisne River, roughly between St. Ménehould and Rethel. An intermediary line behind the Aire also appears to have been under consideration. If the German enveloping maneuver reaches farther around, it will encounter a strong elevated line that includes the fortresses of Reims, Laon, and La Fère.

The Germans will thus encounter:

1. The Belfort, Epinal, Toul, and Verdun line, which has been extended near Mézières along the Meuse. Positioned in front are troops at the Vosges Mountains, the Meurthe River, in Nancy, and in the Côtes Lorraines between Toul and Verdun.
2. The intermediary line on the Aire.
3. The line on the Aisne.
4. The Reims-La Fère line.

Soldiers would feel little confidence attacking these strong lines. An attack from the northwest directed against the Mézières, Rethel, and La Fère flanks, across the Oise River and against the rear of the line, seems more promising than a frontal attack with attempts to encircle its left flank.

To achieve this, the Germans must take control of the Belgian-French border on the left bank of the Meuse, along with the fortified positions at Mézières, Hirson, and Maubeuge, three small

defensive forts, as well as Lille and Dunkirk. To advance this far, they will have to violate the neutrality of Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The violation of Luxembourg's neutrality will have no significant consequences other than protests. From the Dutch perspective, an England that is allied with France is no less an enemy than is Germany. It will be possible to negotiate a treaty with them.

[Belgium will probably offer resistance.] Its army will withdraw to Antwerp according to plan if the Germans advance to the north of the Meuse. To sever the connection both to the sea and England, the Belgian army will have to be encircled there and, if possible, in the north by blocking the Schelde. Liège and Namur must only be placed under surveillance since the Belgians only intend to keep small garrisons there. The Huy Citadel can be taken or rendered inoperational.

If a protected German force advances against Antwerp, Liège, and Namur, it will encounter a border zone that has not been fortified as broadly and thoroughly as the one facing Germany. Should the French wish to defend it, they will have to shift corps and armies from the original front to the threatened area and transfer unused reserves such as the corps on the alpine border. There is reason to hope that they will not be able to do so on a large scale. They will perhaps decide against defending such an exceedingly long line and instead launch an offensive against the imminent invasion with all the troops they can muster. Regardless of whether they mount an attack or merely defend themselves, it is likely that there will be an encounter and a battle near the Mézières-Dunkirk border. It is precisely this battle for which the Germans must prepare themselves. Even if it does not take place and the French remain behind the Aisne, a strong German right flank will be of great value for other operations.

If the Germans want to attack the left flanks of the French positions near Mézières, Rethel, and La Fère, and if, in addition, they want to proceed from the enemy's rear, it seems expedient to advance through Belgium only on the left bank of the Meuse and to pivot to the left after Namur, at which point they should ready themselves for the assault. The difficulty is that there are no routes for a march on such a narrow front, and, more significantly, there are no railways to carry the troops to this front. Due to railway constraints, the German army will primarily be deployed along the Metz-Wesel line. Twenty-three army corps, twelve and a half reserve corps and eight cavalry divisions will be assembled there and first pivot to the left against the Verdun-Dunkirk line. While the reserve corps in the northern wing protect the right flank, particularly against the threat from Antwerp, the reserve corps in the south wing will secure the left flank against an enemy advance on the left bank of the Mosel from the Toul-Verdun line. [The attack will not be directed exclusively against the flanks but also against the left section of the front.]

Three and one-half army corps, one and one-half reserve corps, and three cavalry divisions will remain on the right side of the Mosel. By attacking Nancy, they will first attract as many enemy forces as possible, preventing them from reinforcing the northern front. Later, they will help secure the left flank or reinforce the right.

Metz will provide a base from which to protect the left flank – not the Metz we know today, and not the expanded Metz envisioned in the last projects, but a Metz with extensive field fortifications, whose perimeter is generally defined by the course of the Mosel, the Saar, and the Nied. It will receive a large garrison, *Landwehr* troops, and many units of heavy artillery, and be given the capacity to draw a substantial number of enemy forces.

If possible, the German army should achieve success in battle by means of an enveloping maneuver with its right wing, which must be fortified as much as possible. For this purpose, eight army corps and five cavalry divisions will cross the Meuse below Liège on five roads and advance on Brussels-Namur. After crossing the Meuse above Liège, a ninth army corps will join them, but it must first neutralize the Huy Citadel, which is positioned near the point at which it will cross the Meuse.

The nine army corps will be followed by seven reserve corps. Most of these will be deployed to encircle Antwerp after first providing additional cover for the right flank.

Further, two of the army corps that have remained on the right bank of the Mosel can be deployed as reinforcements. They can be brought up by rail as soon as the train lines (German and Belgian) are clear and operational. They may play a decisive role.

Six army corps and one cavalry division, followed by one reserve division, will be deployed against the Mézières-Namur section of the Meuse. Once these forces cross the river, fifteen to seventeen army corps will be united.

Eight army corps and two cavalry divisions will advance on the Mézières-Verdun Meuse front. Five reserve corps will provide cover [for the left flank] [following the example of Metz].

Ten *Landwehr* brigades will follow north of the Meuse, six south of the river. Six will comprise the wartime garrison of Metz, three and one-half will be on the Upper Rhine, and one in Lower Alsace.

It can be assumed that the Germans' advance will not be impeded. The disembarkation point for the reserve corps in the extreme left flank is on and behind the Saar above Saarbrücken, and in a worst-case scenario, it might prove necessary to shift this back. The advance of the entire army left of the Mosel can also begin according to plan. But it remains absolutely uncertain whether the French army will meet us [on the left, on the right, or on both banks of the Mosel] and where, or if, it will wait for our attack. It is nevertheless important to pass through the narrow area between Brussels and Namur north of the Meuse *before* an encounter with the enemy, so that the nine army corps can achieve their effect without disruption. This is why it is crucial to accelerate the advance of the Germans' right flank wherever possible. Since the army will wheel to the left, the advance of its other units will increasingly slow down on the left.

The German armies advancing on the right bank of the Meuse must be prepared to encounter the enemy at any time on this side of the river. They must at all times be capable of forming a front that is sufficient to at least repel the enemy, even if he is superior. This will be made more difficult by the Longwy and Montmédy fortresses, which, if possible, must be captured or at least neutralized. It will also be difficult due to the forested mountains that cut through the region south of the Semois and by the extensive forested areas north of the river. Constant vigilance and a proper assignment of marching routes is necessary on the part of the army commanders. This will be all the easier to achieve because the daily marches need not be very long. The troops will be able to perform their tasks only if they are trained to maneuver and fight in forested areas and mountains.

Once the Germans penetrate the chain of French fortifications left of the Meuse – be it after a triumphant battle on Belgian territory, a successful attack on the fortified line, or after encountering no strong resistance at all – they will turn on the left flank of the French line near Mézières, Rethel, and La Fère, according to plan. [The forward Mézières-Verdun line on the

Meuse will probably be evacuated quickly, but the French will not remain inactive in the positions on the Aisne and those between Reims and La Fère, simply waiting for an attack on their left flank. They will either find themselves a new line or launch a counterattack. The latter would be more desirable for us. Provided that the two corps can be brought up from the right bank of the Mosel, the Germans will unite their forces to the extent that this is possible under existing conditions. They will march as a single army. Their left wing will be as protected as possible, their right wing is strong. It is improbable that the French, who must first consolidate their corps, will be able to organize their entire army as effectively. The enemy's circumvention maneuver through Belgium will force them to take precipitous steps and make errors when assigning detachments. Once the Germans defeat the Belgian and French fortifications on the northern border and overcome the inhospitable terrain of the Ardennes, they must be seen as having the more favorable position. Yet it will be less favorable if the French await their opponents' attack in a fortified position or behind the course of a river.

It is conceivable that an army beaten in the south of Belgium or the north of France will stop to put up renewed resistance behind the Somme, which is linked by canal to the Oise near La Fère. This would result in the German right wing advancing on Amiens or even on Abbeville.

But this is not very likely. Because of the Germans' advance on the Verdun-Mézières stretch of the Meuse and [further west] in the direction of Hirson, the French will be pinned down in their positions behind the Aisne and between Reims and La Fère. These positions will not be defensible if the Germans advance on both the left flank and the rear directly from Lille-Maubeuge. The French will have to cover this flank or pull back behind the Marne or the Seine. They will be reluctant to do the latter as they will hardly want to give up northern France without a furious battle. So if they do not preserve their honor by launching a counterattack, they will probably prefer to form a defensive flank behind the Oise between La Fère and Paris as opposed to sacrificing a large, rich region, its magnificent fortresses, and Paris's northern front. It is hardly possible to claim that they cannot take up a position behind the Oise. Since the main Belfort-Verdun line does not need to be heavily manned, the available forces will be adequate to defend the Aisne and the Oise. The front of the line behind the Oise is said not to be very robust, but to the left it abuts on a fortress that is as mighty as Paris. If the front is taken, the defenders will also pull back behind the Marne or the Seine, and the victors will be forced to encircle Paris, first on the northern front and then on the other fronts. They will be forced to continue the attack with greatly weakened forces against more powerful opponents. To lure their opponents from their positions, they will circumvent the left front adjacent to Paris and once again deploy strong forces to encircle the western and southern fronts of this colossal fortress.

This much is clear: If the French do not do us the favor of attacking us first and we must advance on Aisne, Reims-La Fère, and the Oise, we will be forced to pursue them with part of our army, regardless of whether they hold the line of Aisne-Oise, etc., or pull back behind the Marne or the Seine, etc. With another part of our army, we will be forced to bypass Paris in the south and surround this fortress. We would be well advised to make timely arrangements to cross the Seine below its juncture with the Oise and first encircle Paris on the western and southern fronts. But whatever our preparations are, we will discover that we are too weak to continue operations in this direction. We will learn the lesson of all earlier conquerors, namely, that an offensive war requires and consumes a great deal of strength, and that this strength diminishes just as that of the defenders increases – and all this in a country bristling with fortresses.

Since the active corps must remain fresh for battle, they must not be deployed for logistics service or for the encirclement and siege of the fortresses.

Once the Germans have moved up to the Oise, their military zone behind the front lines will extend to the sea coast on the right and to the Seine below Paris. In front, it will be demarcated by the Oise and the Aisne up to the Meuse below Verdun. The course of its borderline from there to the Rhine will depend on the progress made by the French on the right bank of the Mosel and other places. This zone will comprise Luxembourg, Belgium, a part of the Netherlands, and northern France. Numerous fortresses must be besieged, encircled, or placed under surveillance in this vast area. The seven and one-half reserve corps and sixteen *Landwehr* brigades on the left of the Mosel will be used to this end, with the exception of, at most, two and one-half reserve corps and two *Landwehr* brigades, which are urgently needed [to reinforce the front] and to protect the flanks and rear of the main army. (It will not be possible to leave behind an army to provide cover if the English land near Dunkirk, Calais, Boulogne, etc. Should the English land their troops and advance, the Germans will have to stop, defend themselves if necessary, eliminate a sufficiently large number of troops, defeat the English, and then continue operations against the French.)

Encircling Antwerp is expected to require five reserve corps (though these will perhaps not prove sufficient).

For the surveillance of the following towns, the Germans are expected to require:

Liège	2 <i>Landwehr</i> brigades	Mézières	
Namur	2 <i>Landwehr</i> brigades	Givet	}1 <i>Landwehr</i> brigade
Maubeuge	2 <i>Landwehr</i> brigades	Hirson	
Lille	2 <i>Landwehr</i> brigades	Longwy	}1 <i>Landwehr</i> brigade
Dunkirk	3 <i>Landwehr</i> brigades	Montmédy	

The railways must be secured if they are needed to provide supplies to the army, and the Germans must occupy the large cities and the populous, industrial regions of Belgium and northwest France. The entire area must provide the army with a secure rear base. We will have to draw on *Landsturm* troops for this. If this measure violates current law, the law must be changed quickly once mobilization commences.

Other troops must be procured. We have just as many replacement battalions as infantry regiments, and, as in 1866, we must form fourth battalions not only from these but also from the existing reserve units and, if necessary, the *Landwehr*. As in 1866, we must also use them and the replacement artillery units to form divisions and army corps. This will enable us to assemble eight army corps. These new formations should not be set up only when the need is greatest or operations inevitably get bogged down. They must be created after the other troops are mobilized.

So we must activate the *Landsturm* troops in order to occupy the entire military zone from Belfort to Maastricht, etc. [We must pull up the *Landwehr* forces that have remained in the forts] and additionally form at least eight army corps. This is the very least that duty calls us to do. We were the ones who invented general military service and the concept of a people in arms, and we demonstrated to other nations the necessity of introducing these institutions. Yet after driving our sworn enemies to vastly increase the size of their armies, we have scaled back our own efforts. We always boast of the large number of people living in Germany, the masses at our disposal, but not every suitable soldier in these masses is trained and armed. [With 39 million

inhabitants, France has 995 battalions in its field army, while Germany has only 971 battalions, though it has 56 million inhabitants. These facts speak clearly for themselves.]

We most urgently need the eight army corps on or behind the army's right wing. Railroad capacity will dictate how many can be transported there. Those troops that cannot be transported through Belgium and France on the left bank of the Meuse and the Sambre must be conveyed to the Meuse between Verdun and Mézières south of the Liège-Namur line. If all of this cannot be done either, the remaining troops can, if necessary, be deployed near Metz and on the right bank of the Mosel.

To advance against the Aisene-Oise-Paris line, the Germans can be expected to require:

Army corps	25
Reserve corps	2½
<u>Newly formed corps</u>	<u>6</u>
	33½ corps

More than one-third will be needed to bypass Paris – seven army corps for the actual circumvention maneuver and six new corps to encircle Paris on the [western and] southern fronts. Chart 3 shows how we plan to advance on and attack these positions.

[If the enemy holds his ground, the attack] will be launched against the entire line, particularly La Fère, which is enclosed on two sides. If successful, it will continue against both Laon and Reims, which is open to the west. [Along the entire line, the corps] will move on the enemy from position to position as in a siege, advancing by day or night, digging in, advancing again, digging in, etc. They will use all the instruments of modern technology to shake the enemy's confidence behind his lines. The attack must never be permitted to come to a standstill, as in the East Asian war.

France must be viewed as a single large fortress. The Belfort-Verdun section of the outermost enceinte is almost impossible to take. Yet the Mézières-Maubeuge-Lille-Dunkirk section is not completely fortified and for the time being hardly manned at all. It is here that we must attempt to penetrate this fortress. If we succeed, we will encounter a second enceinte, or at least part of one, namely the enceinte adjacent to Verdun: the line behind Aisne-Reims and La Fère. But this section can be circumvented in the south. The builder of the fortress will likely have expected a German attack to come from south of the Meuse and the Sambre, not from north of this line. The extension of the fortified Reims-La Fère line along the Somme via Péronne will have resulted in shortcomings that cannot be remedied at this late stage. The defenders can counter the imminent bypass maneuver by mounting an offensive around the left flank of the position near La Fère. Hopefully this counterattack, which might be backed by an advance along the entire length of the Verdun-La Fère front, will end in failure. The defeated defenders may still attempt to hold the Oise between La Fère and Paris, but it is doubtful that they will be able to defend this stretch of the river. If such doubts are justified or the French decide against defending the Oise and allow the Germans to cross the river in large numbers, they will not be able hold the second Verdun-La Fère enceinte. La Fère, Laon, and Reims, which is open to the west, will be taken – the entire elevated line that is designed to withstand an attack from the northeast. The Aisne position will also have to be evacuated. With it, the enemy will expose the Meuse fortresses between Verdun and Toul, which can only offer meager resistance to an attack from the west. The fortresses of Verdun and Toul will become isolated. The entire system

of French fortresses directed against Germany will threaten to collapse. This is why it is conceivable that the French will essay to hold the Oise despite all the position's flaws and even mount a successful resistance. In this case, Paris must be bypassed to the south. This will also prove necessary if the French abandon the Oise and the Aisne and pull back behind the Marne, the Seine, etc. If the Germans allow them to proceed farther in this direction, the result would be an endless war. We must by all means press the French eastward against the Mosel forts, against the Jura and Swiss terrain, by attacking their left flank. The French army must be annihilated.

[For the development of the entire operation] it is crucial to create a powerful right wing, to win the battles with its support, to engage in continuous pursuit of the enemy, and to cause him to give up ground, again and again, with this strong flank.

The ring wing can only be fortified at the expense of the left, which will probably then have to fight a superior enemy.

A tremendous effort is required of the right wing if it is to achieve success. Yet the roads that will be used are generally very good. There would even be sufficient quarters in numerous towns if the corps comprising the right wing were not required to march in such large number that even the most densely populated areas are unable to provide sufficient quarters.

On the other hand, there will hardly be a lack of food. The rich regions in Belgium and northern France will be able to provide ample supplies, and if they are placed under appropriate pressure, they will procure any supplies they lack from outside sources.

If its forces are placed under an increased strain, Belgium may be swayed to refrain from all hostilities and to surrender its fortresses in return for all the favors a third party enjoys when avoiding participation in a battle between two rivals.

At the start of the war, three army corps and one reserve corps with three cavalry divisions must attack Nancy on the right bank of the Mosel. Success will depend primarily on whether the French confine themselves to defensive measures or whether they make a counterattack true to their principles. If they do the latter, the primary purpose of the attack on Nancy will be achieved, namely, to tie up strong forces on the eastern French front. The more troops the French deploy in a counterattack, the better it will be for the Germans. The Germans, however, must not get bogged down in stubborn fighting. Their primary task is to draw a strong opponent and restrain him with the help of the expanded position of Metz. There will hardly be any danger for the detached army on the right bank of the Mosel, but the situation for the main [German] army will deteriorate if the army on the right bank of the Mosel is superior in numbers. Our goal must be to restrain as many French forces with as few German troops as possible.

If the French do not mount a counterattack, the Germans must transfer two army corps as quickly as possible to their outermost wing in Belgium. It is crucial that this wing be fortified. Only then can we await the outcome of the battle with a quiet conscience after the 25 army corps on the left bank of the Mosel have been made available for a battle that requires great fortitude.

A few troops will remain on the right bank of the Mosel, including:

One army corps
One reserve corps

30th reserve division (Strasbourg)

Perhaps two new corps

Landwehr brigades on the Upper Rhine and from Metz, if it is not attacked

59th *Landwehr* brigade (Lower Alsace)

Six rifle battalions in the Vosges Mountains

These troops must be fortified if at all possible. The fortress garrisons are still the source of reserves from which new corps can be formed. The *Landsturm* in southern Germany can also be deployed to protect the territory left of the Rhine and to cordon off Belfort, etc. A new army must be created and given the assignment to advance on the Mosel between Belfort and Nancy, while the five reserve corps in the left wing and the two *Landwehr* brigades close off Verdun and attack the Côtes Lorraines.

If, during deployment, the French learn that we are gathering both on the Lower Rhine and the Dutch and Belgian borders, they will not doubt for a moment that the Germans plan to advance on Paris, and they will be wary of advancing to the area between Strasbourg and Metz with either all their forces or their main units. They will also be wary of invading Germany across the Upper Rhine with all their troops. That would amount to ordering the garrison out of the fortress just when the siege is starting. If, despite everything, they do one or the other, it will be welcome to the Germans as it will only make their task easier. It would be most advantageous for us if the French were to invade southern Germany through Switzerland. This would bring us an ally whom we need very badly, one who could engage part of the enemy forces.

In all these scenarios, the Germans would be well advised to alter their operational plan as little as possible. The Lower Mosel must be secured between Trier and Koblenz, and the stretch between the Mosel and the Meuse near Diedenhofen must be closed off. The German army will try to reach the Koblenz-La Fère line with reserves in its right wing. The right bank of the Rhine from Koblenz upward will be occupied from the rear, and the attack will be made with the right wing.

[If the French cross the Upper Rhine, they will meet resistance in the Black Forest. The troops that are moved up from the rear will be assembled on the Main and the Iller.]

If they persist with these operations, the Germans can be sure that the French will quickly turn around, not north but south of Metz, heading in the direction of the greatest danger. It is therefore essential for the German right wing to be as strong as possible, for it is here that the decisive battle can be expected.

Count Schlieffen

Source: Alfred Count von Schlieffen, "The Schlieffen Plan" (1905), reprinted in Gerhard Ritter, *Der Schlieffenplan: Kritik eines Mythos* [*The Schlieffen Plan: Analysis of a Myth*]. Munich, 1956, pp. 145-60.

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