

# An overview of the schlieffen plan history essay



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The stalemate of 1915 was quite unpredicted during the time, both sides making their plans to attack. The first idea that it was going to be a swift idea was quickly deminished. Few of the devised plans during WWI were in fact successful, but many failed. Plan 17 of the French was vastly overestimated. Although the British had valuable success against Germany at Mons, it was not quite what Britain had expected. It was greatly outgunned and had to send many reinforcements. Yet, it was not only the execution of the plans that brought about their failure. Exterior factors resulted in the plans being changed, such as the Schlieffen plan. It was changed so much it did not even resemble the original plan. However, these failures led to a colossal series of trenches being formed from Switzerland to Belgium. Neither side could take the other side, hence referred to as a stalemate. Attempts were made to break this stalemate, but none as important as the Battle of the Somme and The Battle of Verdun. Many men died at these battles, and no man's land was littered with bodies piled high. However, technology and terrain played a major role in preventing these battles from success.

Once war broke out in 1914, plans for a quick success against the opposing armies had already been developed. The Germans believe that the French were their greatest threat, and so the "Schlieffen Plan" was devised by a German army official, General Schlieffen. The plan relied on the right wing of the German army to sweep behind Paris and take the capital, while the main body of the army was to draw as much attention away from this sweep as possible, thus creating a diversion. The Germans believed that any changes to the circumstances in 1914 would not hinder the Schlieffen plan's success.

However, many factors were not taken into account. The Schlieffen plan was reliant on constant movement for it to be successful, which General Moltke had made for an even swifter takeover and made some as he thought "minor adjustments" and the Germans tried to mobilize too quickly. This led to Moltke losing contact with certain wings of the army for days on end before contact was made again. Much of the army's sections had either moved too fast or too slow, which is considered the first failure of the Schlieffen plan.

The Belgian army was considered neutral between Germany and the allies. Once the invasion was initiated, they began to realize the loyalty which Belgium had for the Allies. Belgium's small army withheld the Germans for twelve days at Liege which gave Britain time to bring their own plan into action. The British Expeditionary Force could be quickly shipped onto the mainland when required. However, once the Germans met Britain at Mons, after being shipped from Britain, their impressions were quickly changed. The Belgian army withdrew to Mons also and Liege was lost, along with the capital Brussels, but all was not lost as the Schlieffen plan had been delayed. At the same time, Russia had mobilized much faster than Germany expected, which resulted in Germany having to fight on two fronts, which they had wanted to avoid since the start of the war. They had underestimated Russia's speed to mobilize troops, taking them only 10 days to get the force ready to move.

The Germans believed that the Schlieffen plan would still be successful once they had captured Brussels, but once into the city they realized the extent of the Belgian rebellion. Railway lines had been destroyed along with bridges and tunnels to prevent quick efficient shipping of German supplies and

communication. The Germans could no longer use the railway for mobilizing artillery and supplies causing them to have to find another means to move army supplies. However, the German army still continued on to Mons, knowing they were likely to meet the BEF at some point, but their full strength was never taken into account, they did not have any artillery because it was all held up because of the railway network. The conflict at Mons was the first real impact on the numbers in the German army. The Germans were not expecting the British to be at Mons, but they were aware of them being inside Belgium. When the two armies met, the Germans were under the impression that the British were using machine guns due to the vigorous rifle fire from the BEF. The Officers still ordered them to march and many got mowed down, the Germans taking heavy casualties. Despite the British repulsion of the Germans, they were ultimately forced to retreat. The Germans had no idea of the consequences of the delay of the Schlieffen plan, but in Berlin, Germany was celebrating the victory of the Schlieffen plan.

Ironically, the original Schlieffen plan predicted the French reaction to the invasion almost perfectly which is about the only thing the Germans got right. "Plan 17" was for the French force to march on to fight the German force. The French were so confident that they went into battle in their imperial colors of blue and red, unlike the Germans who were in grey/green/brown camouflage, and the French could be seen from far far away giving the Germans the advantage who were in camouflage. The French were so egotistic so to speak that they believed the Germans would just run away at the sight of the French. The Germans were grossly

underestimated. A large portion of the French army was lost and they were pushed back into France by the Germans to put up the final defense to save Paris.

While the French were pushing into German territory on the east, Germany had conquered Liege and were heading south towards Paris. The French realized the hole they were digging for themselves. They turned from Lorraine and headed back towards Paris to put up the final desperate defense. The Germans at this point were the closest they would ever be to capturing Paris. The French army intercepted the Germans at the River Marne on their return from Lorraine. The Germans were in sight of the Eiffel Tower, but were blocked by the French army. 2 Million were involved in a week long battle. The BEF were given time to join with the French army after fighting the battle of the Mons and the combined forces held back the German opposition. Extra troops were imported from Paris via taxi and hopes of German victory were quickly diminished. Moltke realized the situation realizing that they could no longer win the war and he was replaced by General Falkenhayn as the new director of the army.

The final phase of the war of movement was an act of desperation from both sides. The Germans recognized the importance of the ports at the English Channel, if they could capture these ports, they would be able to restrict the flow of troops and supplies through from Britain to re-establish the already reduced BEF. Both sides raced in an attempt to outflank each other. They believed that it would bring certain victory because it would restrict supplies being brought to the surrounded army. Neither side could do it which led them to "dig in" where they were, which left a series of trenches to be

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formed from the Belgian coast to the Swiss Alps. The British Navy was left to control the English Channel and a supply route for the allies was left available. The trenches had been dug, and the Schlieffen plan had officially failed.

Nobody from either side had predicted that wars of such magnitude could take place, or that so many men would be lost. The terrain on the western front was very bad for marching soldiers into a torrent of machine gun fire, which both sides were doing, and just wasting human life by sending more to the opposing side. The combination of this new machine gun technology, the terrain and the "march to the other side" style of warfare made it virtually impossible to cross "no mans land" and still remain intact. Germany started to draw away from these upfront assaults once the trenches had been dug, however, at times, it seemed necessary to march men across "no mans land" between trenches to oppose the enemy. There was a stalemate between either sides, no side could march to the other without them getting mowed down in "no mans land". However, attempts were made to break it. The French lost many men at Champagne, and the British attempted to break through German lines at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge and the Germans at Ypres & Festubert. These attacks didn't really do much and the stalemate was not even close to being broken. This is primarily due to the technology which was developed during this time period. Gas was used to kill thousands of men with one canister. Tanks were also introduced with the expectation that they would be able to cross "no mans land" with ease. But poor use of these tanks and in the wrong situation meant that they were easy targets for artillery fire and broke down easily. However, none of these

machines were as successful as the machine gun, as the flat terrain allowed one man to literally slaughter thousands of men with one gun. When there was a shortage of ammunition at Champagne, there was a huge scandal. Possibly if this shortage was not encountered, the push may have been successful. The “march to the other side” tactic would not be abandoned and many men were being sent to their death by machine gun fire etc. By 1915, both Generals of the Allied armies, Haig and Joffre, decided that any further attacks must be of massive proportion and in strategic positions. It was finally decided that the major assault would take place at River Somme.

Joffre and Haig agreed that the battle of the Somme should open fire in August 1916. However, the Germans had plans of their own, and in February of 1916. The Germans had Howitzers (large artillery) within kilometres of the French forts. Falkenhayn chose to attack a French position for he feared a fight with the British. He also believed that if France were defeated, the British would withdraw from the war. Hence, Falkenhayn chose France's strongest point to break through on the Western Front - Verdun. It did not matter to Falkenhayn whether or not the battle was a victory; the aim was to run France dry of troops. February 21st 1916, the German guns exploded. The French were taken utterly by surprise and had only two divisions left at Verdun. The howitzers literally devastated French trenches, and many were left to escape to the forts amidst the artillery fire. Surprisingly, the French still had enough men to hold the forts once the bombardment had ceased.

Due to the fact that few French men were present at Verdun, strategic points such as Fort Douaumont were lost to the Germans without them losing a single man. However, French commander Joffre was quick to react and sent

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General Pertain along with more soldiers to aid Verdun. Supplies were sent in from Paris and by the end of March; The French and Germans had lost virtually an equal amount of men. By the time May arrived, the French army was slowly slipping, and the Germans were no longer penetrating. Haig agreed to change the date of the battle of Somme to remove attention from Verdun, and June brought about the start of the Battle of the Somme. However, it was all too late for the French army. Very few French soldiers remained, and all hope was no placed on the British to defend their country. They had lost 350, 000 men and Germany 330, 000. Verdun was a turning point in the stalemate. Germany had suffered irreparable loses and not even made a dint in the British forces. As a result of the events, Joffre was replaced by Nivelle and Falkenhayn by Hindenburg.

The Battle of the Somme was believed by the British and French to be almost unstoppable. However, the Germans had suspected the Allies to attack at the Somme, if they were to attack at all. Two years prior to the war they had begun the construction of deep trenches which would protect them from such bombardment. Initially the allies were going along a 100 km front however this was shortened to about 50 after the battle at Verdun. However, the battle was vastly underestimated by the British. Haig believed his huge mass of artillery would simply destroy everything in the German trenches, including the barbed wire rolls which surrounded the trenches. The artillery rained down for nearly two weeks with almost 200, 000 howitzer shells being fired each day before the bombardment ceased.

The allies thought that the Germans had been whipped out and where cheerful when crossing no-mans-land. However, the Germans had survived

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the bombardment in their deep underground dugouts, and as the bombardment ended they scrambled to prepare their trenches with machine guns ready to fire. The commander of the attack General Henry Rawlinson ordered his men to march across in their divisions at a rate of 100 yards per minute and 100 yards apart. This was due to Rawlinson not having any faith in the troops to keep their conduct. Haig was even informed of the orders Rawlinson had given but did not give any instructions to cease the butchery. Haig believed he would gain a total of 10 miles on the first day of the battle, however, only a total of 6 was gained throughout the whole campaign. There were 60, 000 casualties on the first day, 20, 000 of which were dead or missing. But Haig continued and ordered more men across in the “ march to the other side” tactic, while men were getting mowed down.

From that point on, no major offensives were made by the Germans to resist the opposing Allies, and by the time the United States entered the war, it was certain that Germany was defeated, and they knew it too. By the end of the Battle of the Somme there were 420, 000 British, 250, 000 French and 650, 000 German casualties. The Somme was considered another failed frontal assault in WWI.

Germany only had one real chance to achieve its goal in defeating the Allies in WWI. It was integral that the Schlieffen plan was executed correctly for the German's to capture Paris and ultimately force Britain to withdraw. The Germans also never took into account the virtually inexhaustible supply of British troops who enlisted in the hope of a quick victory (almost 3 million men) once conscription was introduced in 1917. WWI was a waste of human life and aimed to bleed the other side dry of troops. Although Germany had <https://assignbuster.com/an-overview-of-the-schlieffen-plan-history-essay/>

the economic support prior to the war, supplies were eventually exhausted by 1918, unlike Britain who foresaw these events. If the Schlieffen plan had been executed correctly, Germany would have almost certainly guaranteed victory over the Allies and the horrific losses in the Battles for the Somme and Verdun would not have taken place.