

# Analysis of the Early Fighting in the First World War, 108 Years Ago

## Part IV

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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Region: [Europe](#)

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*At the latter end of August 1914, in the face of German Army victories and advances, the Franco-British forces were in retreat all along the front west of Verdun, a city located 140 miles east of Paris.*

On 20 August 1914, the German 1st Army (Alexander von Kluck) had captured the undefended Belgian capital city, Brussels. Belgium's position was extremely difficult and most of the Belgian Army, in spite of displaying staunch resistance against the Germans, was compelled to retire to Antwerp in northern Belgium. By 24 August, with the French and British having suffered reverses at Dinant and Mons in southern Belgium, the Western allies were withdrawing southward from Belgian soil towards the vital Paris region.

The German war strategy called the Schlieffen Plan looked at this stage to be running smoothly. One key reason, for the rapid German progress in August 1914 and Western allied losses, was due to the gross French military errors and miscalculations; such as the French having launched ill-advised attacks, from 7 August, into their former provinces of Alsace and Lorraine close to the border of Switzerland, and also in the Ardennes forest area. All of this conformed perfectly to what was laid out in Germany's Schlieffen Plan.

The Battle of the Ardennes alone, between 21–23 August, resulted in 42,557 casualties for the French 3rd Army (Pierre Ruffey) and French 4th Army (Langle de Cary), in opposition to the German 4th Army (Albrecht Duke of Württemberg) and German 5th Army (Crown Prince Wilhelm). The fighting in the Ardennes saw 27,000 French soldiers killed in the course of a few hours on 22 August. This black day of the French Army had damaged its morale. Further losses, and continued poor French leadership, would lead to the remarkable mass mutinies of 1917, which permanently weakened the French Armed Forces as was starkly revealed in 1940.

In August 1914, French military intelligence had succeeded in underestimating German manpower strength in the West by hundreds of thousands of men. The French Army high command also felt its soldiers alone could defeat the German Army, but there was no logic to back up such a belief. The French were soundly beaten in the 6 months which comprised the Franco-Prussian War, ending in January 1871. In the more than 4 decades since, the gap between the Germans and French had widened, as Germany's industrial strength and growing population left France trailing behind. The French military leader Charles de Gaulle said, "Our decline dates back to the war between Napoleon and the Russians [in 1812]".

With the aid of England and Russia in 1914, the French at least had a fighting chance against Germany. This was looking less likely as August 1914 was reaching its end. The French offensives in Alsace-Lorraine and the Ardennes had been a fiasco. The French commander-in-chief, Joseph Joffre, who was responsible for these defeats, failed previously to discern that the main weight of Germany's advance would fall elsewhere; as the German right wing was marching to the west of the Meuse river, through Belgium and into northern France. General Joffre realized this was definitely the case around 26 August, too late, when he cancelled the Ardennes offensive on that date.

The same day, 26 August, the British Expeditionary Force (John French), which had to withdraw from southern Belgium, fought a delaying action in the far north of France at Le Cateau. On 29 August, the French 5th Army (Charles Lanrezac) tried to stop the Germans at Guise, 100 miles north of Paris. Both of these Anglo-French efforts failed, though they did temporarily halt the march of the German right wing. At Guise, the German 2nd Army (Karl von Bülow) was stalled for 36 hours through to 30 August, while it had to wait in any case for the German 1st Army and German 3rd Army (Max Klemens von Hausen) to come up. Each hour of delay in the West meant that the Russian Army was advancing closer in the East.

On 31 August 1914, the Raymond Poincaré government fled Paris in some panic and moved to Bordeaux, taking with them the gold reserves from the central bank. At this point it must have appeared probable, to many observers, that the Germans were well on their way to knocking the Western allies out of the war. However, the French 2nd Army (Edouard de Castelnau) still controlled the Grand Couronné heights above Nancy, Lorraine's largest city. The French 2nd Army was able, furthermore, to send troops to the west towards the Paris area while the French 3rd Army, under its new commander Maurice Sarrail who replaced Ruffey, continued holding on to Verdun.

Under the Schlieffen Plan, as envisaged by its renowned creator Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, his successor as German commander-in-chief, Helmuth von Moltke, should have been allowing the French 2nd and 3rd armies to advance further into the trap; thereby committing themselves to an area which contained little strategic importance close to Switzerland, and was held by the weaker German left wing; which was holding a line between the city of Metz over 100 miles south to the Swiss border. The decisive fighting meanwhile was taking place further west, where the German right wing was sweeping down on the Paris region.

That General von Moltke had not allowed the German left wing to fall back, and entice deeper into the net the French 2nd and 3rd armies, reveals that he failed to grasp the strategic concept set forth by Field Marshal von Schlieffen, concerning the German left wing. Now von Moltke was to show that he also misunderstood the strategic concept regarding the German right wing. Von Schlieffen had outlined that the right wing – which consisted of the majority of German Army divisions – would pass through Belgium, the southern Netherlands and northern France, cross the Seine river just above Rouen in the Normandy region, sweep around Paris to the west and south, and smash the French Army against the Swiss frontier like a sledgehammer striking an anvil.

Leading the right wing was the German 1st Army, which was designated to advance 40 miles west of Paris; and then, in a vast enveloping maneuver, to wheel back inward in an eastwardly direction, only when the German 1st Army had progressed well to the south of Paris. On 31 August, the very day the French government fled Paris, a definite departure from the Schlieffen Plan occurred when von Moltke granted the 1st Army commander, Alexander von Kluck, permission to shorten his march and wheel inward directly to the north of Paris, in the hope of finding the French flank and driving it east from Paris; rather than, again, performing such a move after having advanced to the west and south of the French capital, as von Schlieffen had envisaged.

Von Moltke decided to abandon the very essence of the Schlieffen Plan, the giant outflanking maneuver, in favor of a frontal assault on Paris, which had less chance of succeeding. As a consequence von Moltke ordered that they drive forward in the center, while the German 1st Army, which was to have been the hammerhead of the assault, was relegated to the role of flank guard.

What was worse than even this, was that for every mile the German 1st Army advanced prematurely southeastward the risk grew that it, which had intended to be the outflanker, would itself be outflanked by the French troops amassing around Paris. While Napoleon would have been turning over in his grave at the French military shortcomings in this war, von Schlieffen, who died early in 1913, would surely have been doing the same concerning the errors of his successor. Von Moltke had already weakened the German right wing, by

sending 2 corps to surround Antwerp where the Belgian Army sought refuge. Then on 26 August, he dispatched a further 2 German corps to East Prussia to help guard against the Russian Army's approach.

On 3 September, the Franco-British command finally became aware of the change in direction of the German 1st Army. The Allies knew it was marching diagonally across the face of Paris, with its flank exposed to a potential counterattack from the capital. This was not clear to the civilian population of Paris most of whom, by late August and early September, were afflicted by a mixture of unease and panic. There was a fear that the German Army was going to roll into the center of Paris, and that the war would be as good as over. If Paris was taken, the Germans would still have to destroy the remaining Franco-British forces in the field, and then march east to fight the Russian divisions.

At the beginning of September 1914 some protesters in Paris, disillusioned with how the war was going, demanded that the capital be declared an "open city", in order to spare the famous metropolis and its treasures from German assaults. In the war's opening weeks, according to historical analyst Christopher Klein, "Sporadic air raids hit the city [Paris] at night, resulting in damage more psychological than physical, but on September 2 a German biplane carpet-bombed the city with propaganda leaflets that read, 'There is nothing you can do but surrender'."

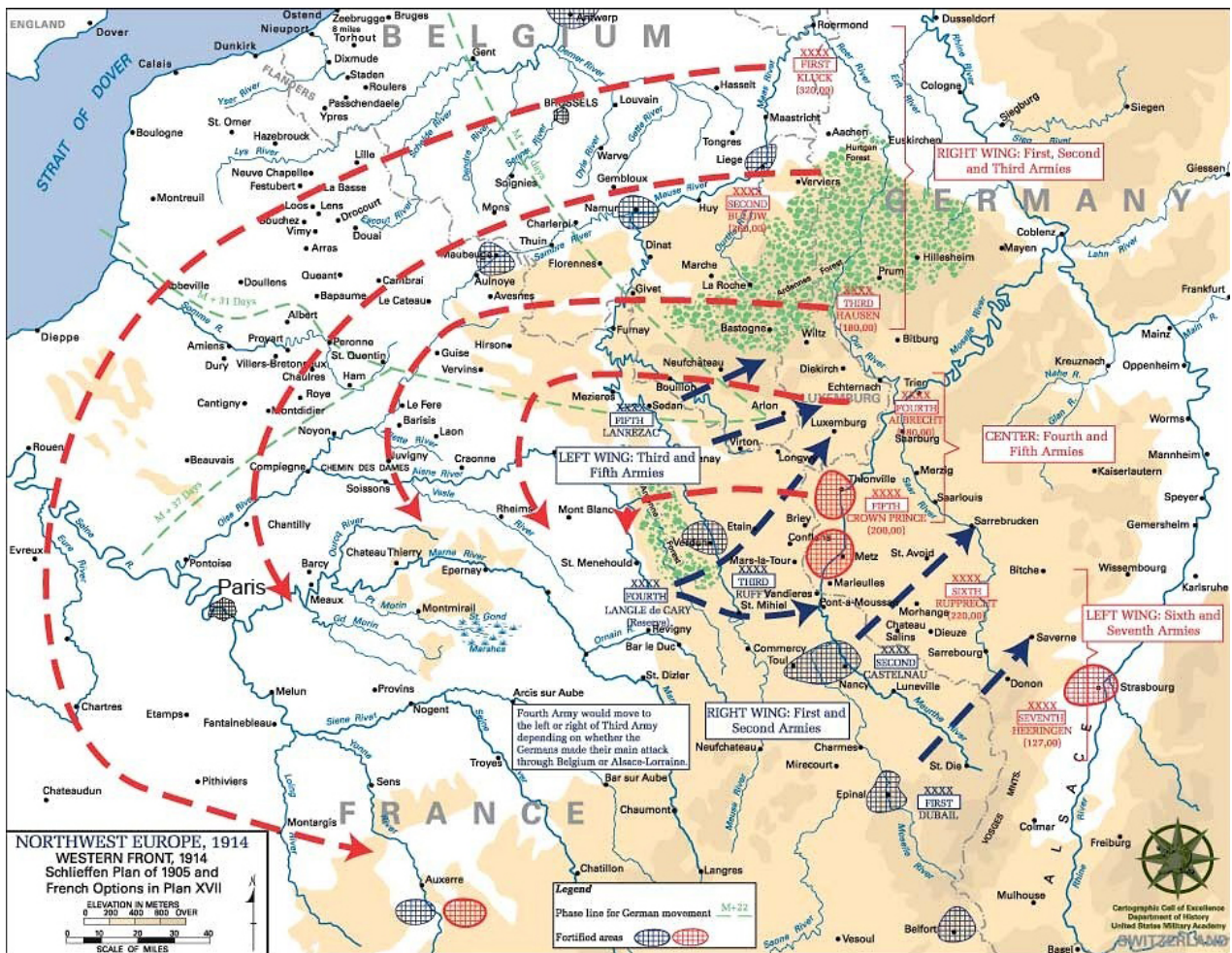
Tens of thousands of Parisians were cramming into train stations, a last-ditch attempt to flee the city before the Germans arrived. Staff at the Louvre art museum in Paris shifted its masterpiece paintings to Toulouse, in the south of France. The military governor of Paris, General Joseph-Simon Gallieni, forecast that the Germans would enter the capital by 5 September 1914, if nothing was done to stop them. At the end of August, the German right wing was within 100 miles of Paris. As the Allies quickly retreated across the front, the Germans in following days moved closer and closer to Paris.

By 3 September, the Germans were about 20 miles from Paris as the crow flies, having reached the commune of Meaux to the northeast of the French capital, after they successfully forced a crossing of the Marne river. The American scholar of history Vejas G. Liulevicius wrote, "It is said that German advance troops could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance".

If so it was a deceptive vision. In early September, the reality is that the German armies were in a state of some confusion, and the threat to Paris was in fact passing. This had not been altogether surprising, when considering that General von Moltke made critical strategic alterations to the Schlieffen Plan in the heat of battle, which disrupted the flow of the German progress. In addition, the long marches were placing strain on Germany's supply systems.

The fatal flaw in Field Marshal von Schlieffen's war strategy, was that the Germans did not have the required number of troops in the West with which to eliminate the Western allies within the allotted 6 weeks, while keeping a watchful eye on the Russian Army in the East. This manpower shortage was merely overcome partly, by the German use of reserve units at the outset of the campaign.





“Western Front 1914; Schlieffen Plan of 1905. (Photo by Tinodela, licensed under the public domain)

The French implemented steps to restore the situation when, at 10 pm on 4 September, commander-in-chief Joffre issued orders for a general counterattack to be launched on 6 September; in the hope that the German 1st Army, and part of the German 2nd Army, would be crushed between converging assaults. Joffre’s decision to counterattack may have come after relenting to the pressure applied on him by General Gallieni, the commandant of Paris. Gallieni had warned Joffre that the Germans would advance in force west of the Meuse river, through Belgium and northern France, but his advice was ignored.

That September of 1914, the French plan of counterattack looked promising on the maps at headquarters. As it was, the Allied counterattack proceeded in slow motion. Most of 5 September was taken up getting the Franco-British armies into their starting positions. The Germans by now were aware of the coming Allied counterstroke, and they abandoned the attempt to take Paris. This was a difficult, but correct decision, which allowed Germany to regroup and save its armies.

On 6 September, the day that the First Battle of the Marne officially began, 3 corps from the German 1st Army recrossed the Marne river, in order to remove the possibility of encirclement and destruction. Due to the Franco-British sluggishness, the Germans got across the Marne completely unmolested. That they had to do so, shows how badly the German war strategy had gone awry. Von Moltke was rapidly losing control of his armies. By 6 September, a considerable gap was emerging between the German 1st and 2nd armies. The puncture in the German frontline was covered only by some cavalry, and other light infantry units called Jäger battalions. On 7 September, the British Army (the British

Expeditionary Force now consisted of 3 corps) and the French 5th Army advanced northward to engage the German troops.

Military historian Lt. Col. Donald J. Goodspeed wrote that the Anglo-French troops again “moved with exasperating slowness and caution, though there was almost nothing in front of them. By last light, the British had pressed ahead only to within 4 or 5 miles of the Marne; Franchet d’Esperey’s 5th Army [Lanrezac was replaced] had not advanced quite so far. For a brief time, there had been a chance to cut off and destroy the German 1st Army, but between September 7 and 9 this chance disappeared. The British had advanced only about 8 miles a day and the French 5th Army rather less”.

It can be mentioned that the German 1st Army had advanced on average 12 miles per day, during a 15 day period in August 1914, covering 180 miles of ground; compared to the 8 miles a day covered by the British and less by the French 5th Army. Now as the Germans retreated over the Marne river, General von Moltke sat disconsolately in his headquarters, having suffered a nervous breakdown. He realized quite clearly that his strategic blunders may well have cost Germany the war. Von Moltke’s inadequacies undoubtedly contributed quite a lot to the Schlieffen Plan’s failure. Goodspeed noted, “The Germans would lose the war on the Marne, but they were to be spared a tactical defeat. In this they were unfortunate, for a quick victory by either side in 1914 would probably have been preferable to the long drawn-out agony that was actually in store”.

Kaiser Wilhelm II bears ultimate responsibility for the breakdown of the Schlieffen Plan. It was he who insisted, in 1905, that he wanted the reluctant von Moltke to assume the commander-in-chief position. Von Moltke had said at the time, “I lack the capacity for risking all on a single throw, that capacity which made the greatness of such born commanders as Napoleon, or our own Frederick II, or my uncle [Helmuth von Moltke the Elder]”.

In 1911, General von Moltke had let slip his lack of belief in the Schlieffen Plan. That year he wrote, “It will be very important to have in Holland a country whose neutrality allows us to have imports and supplies. She must be the windpipe that enables us to breathe”. Note the words “imports and supplies” which are necessary in an extended conflict only, nor does a country need a “windpipe that enables us to breathe” in a short war. Supporting his above comments von Moltke chose not to assail Dutch territory in 1914, because he did not wish to offend the neutral Netherlands. Von Schlieffen, on the other hand, had wanted a brief war which he knew Germany could win, not a long war which he knew they could not. On that basis, von Schlieffen designated a German invasion of the Netherlands in the event of war erupting.

Had the Schlieffen Plan succeeded in 1914, or were the Germans to be defeated that year, it is unlikely demagogues would have emerged to the extent they later did – such as in Italy with Benito Mussolini and in Germany with Adolf Hitler. Instead, 4 years of continental war created the sorts of hardships and instability in societies, which made possible fascist autocrats gaining power. Moreover, had the First World War been decided in a few months, though this is less certain, there might have been no Second World War, at least no second global conflict in which figures like Hitler and Mussolini would feature.

In the meantime, by 9 September 1914 the German right wing remained in a precarious position close to Paris, while the German left wing was at a standstill in northeastern France. With the situation beside the Marne especially hazardous, von Moltke dispatched his chief of intelligence, Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Hentsch, to visit the various German army

headquarters by staff car, with the authority to order a retirement if necessary. At the headquarters of the German 3th, 4th and 5th armies Hentsch found everything in order; but with the German 2nd Army Hentsch perceived that its commander, Karl von Bülow, was badly on edge. It was agreed between Hentsch and von Bülow, if the British and French crossed the Marne river in force, that the German 2nd Army should retire to the north.

By 7:30 am on 9 September, the British managed to get portions of its I Corps and II Corps across the Marne river; but for some strange reason, they then halted at 11 am and did not resume their advance until late afternoon. The progress of the French 5th Army was almost non-existent. Regardless, because of the untenable German position beside the Marne, when Lieutenant-Colonel Hentsch arrived at German 1st Army headquarters, he ordered it to withdraw in agreement with its commander General von Kluck.

At dusk on 9 September the German 1st and 2nd armies, and the western half of the German 3rd Army, were falling back towards the Vesle and Aisne rivers, located approximately 80 and 90 miles respectively northeast of Paris. By now, the British were a mere 6 or 7 miles north of the Marne while, incredibly, the French had still not crossed the river.

Despite this, the remainder of the German 3rd Army had to conform to the retreat of the other German forces over the Marne. On 11 September, von Moltke ordered the German 4th and 5th armies to also retire. Goodspeed wrote, "The Marne was far from being a tactical victory for the Allies. Yet the Marne was *the* great battle of the war, the decisive turning point. The Germans were never again to be so near to victory, as they had been in those August and September days, not even in March and April of 1918. The great German plan had failed, and now Germany was faced with exactly that two-front war of attrition that her military leaders had always recognized she could not win".

On 12 September, the day in which the Marne battle concluded, the German 1st and 2nd armies were back across the Aisne river dozens of miles from the French capital. Rather than defend the vulnerable Aisne river line, the German 1st and 2nd armies chose commanding defensive positions on the higher ground, about 2 miles north of the Aisne.

The German front in the West was established the following day, 13 September, and would remain so for the next 4 years. When Franco-British attacks on 13 and 14 September failed to break through the German lines, both sides began to entrench. On 14 September von Moltke was relieved of his role as commander-in-chief, to be replaced by Erich von Falkenhayn. Amazingly enough Joffre, whose errors were just as glaring or perhaps worse than von Moltke's, would remain at the head of the French Army until mid-December 1916.

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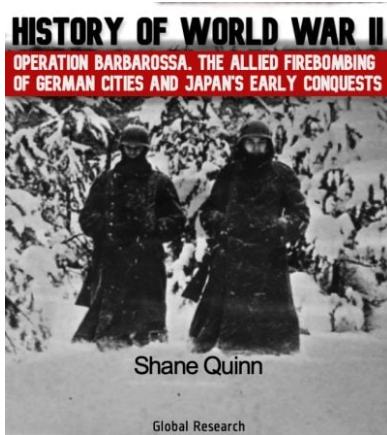
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Featured image: Francs-tireurs in the Vosges during the Franco-Prussian War. (Licensed under the public domain)



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By **Shane Quinn**

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The remaining chapters focus for the large part on the fighting itself, as the Nazis and their Axis allies, the Romanians and Finns at first, swarmed across Soviet frontiers in the early hours of 22 June 1941. The German-led invasion of the USSR was the largest military offensive in history, consisting of almost four million invading troops. Its outcome would decide whether the post-World War II landscape comprised of an American-German dominated globe, or an American-Soviet dominated globe. The Nazi-Soviet war was, as a consequence, a crucial event in modern history and its result was felt for decades afterward and, indeed, to the present day.

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