

Unspoken History: Early Fighting in World War I. France’s “Continental War Plan” Titled Plan XVII

Part II

By [Shane Quinn](#)

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Read Part I:



[Analysis of the Early Fighting in the First World War, 108 Years Ago](#)

By [Shane Quinn](#), August 08, 2022

After extensive military analysis the French Army’s plan of campaign for a continental war, titled Plan XVII, was completed in February 1914, about 6 months before the First World War broke out.

Germany, and its formidable armed forces, had for decades been recognised by a large part of the French elite as their country’s principal foe. This was especially the case from 1871, when early that year German-led troops defeated the French Army in the Franco-Prussian War, a conflict which lasted for 6 months.

France was stripped of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine, located in north-eastern France, which were annexed to the new German Empire in 1871. The loss of Alsace and Lorraine was felt very deeply in France. The famous German philosopher Karl Marx had warned at the time,

“If Alsace and Lorraine are taken, then France will later make war on Germany in conjunction with Russia. It is unnecessary to go into the unholy consequences”.

Otto von Bismarck, the German chancellor, had also expressed misgivings about the annexation of Alsace and Lorraine. He believed, correctly, that it would increase French hostility towards Germany.

The French Army's war strategy in 1914 suited the Germans so well, it was almost as though it had been compiled by Berlin's military staff. General Joseph Joffre, commander-in-chief of the French forces, was right in assessing that the German Army would attack neutral Belgium at the outbreak of hostilities; but General Joffre, through inept strategic planning, did not believe the bulk of the German Army would advance west of the Meuse river, and swing back around Paris through northern France. In reality, for almost a decade before 1914, it was planned in Berlin that in the event of war most of Germany's divisions would indeed advance through Belgium and northern France, which the author covered in the previous article.

Such a strategic move was the central concept of the Schlieffen Plan, named after its chief strategist Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, who died in January 1913 aged 79. Field Marshal von Schlieffen had been Chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1905, when he retired late that year. He was succeeded early in 1906 by General Helmuth von Moltke (The Younger), who was the nephew of the renowned 19th century commander, Helmuth von Moltke (The Elder).

French military intelligence committed a grave misjudgement in 1914, by underestimating German manpower strength in the west by 12 corps. In Germany's case this amounted to over half a million men. The German 1st Army and 2nd Army comprised altogether of 12 corps, totalling around 580,000 soldiers. These 2 armies would lead the offensive through northern France, in the hope of capturing Paris and destroying the French forces in the field.

Such was France's desire to reclaim Alsace and Lorraine, their opening attack of World War I was directed into that region. At 5 am on 7 August 1914, the French VII Corps (General Louis Bonneau) from the 1st Army advanced towards the city of Mulhouse, in southern Alsace, close to the border of Switzerland. This French offensive into Alsace, sanctioned by commander-in-chief General Joffre, served no strategic purpose at all. It was launched for mystical reasons, not military ones. General Joffre, who was not a devoutly religious man, found other outlets for what would normally be religious sentiment, and so he was fixated to an unusual degree on Alsace and Lorraine.

Field Marshal von Schlieffen had, in fact, anticipated years before that the French would almost immediately enter Alsace and Lorraine, should war break out. He had hoped that would be so, as such a venture could only draw French forces away from the decisive northern sector, where the German right wing would be advancing southwards from Belgium to the Paris region.

French soldiers presented arms as they crossed the long-desired frontier into Alsace,

saluting the redemption of their Promised Land. The next morning, 8 August 1914, as according to the Schlieffen Plan the German 7th Army, which was based in Alsace, fell back, allowing the French VII Corps to capture Mulhouse without fighting. The French troops in Mulhouse rejoiced, drank wine and complimented themselves for making history, rather than preparing defensive positions. The following day, 9 August, the Germans counterattacked and swept the French forces out of Mulhouse. The city was retaken by German soldiers on 10 August. Donald J. Goodspeed, a military historian, observed how "There had been no point to this futile French expedition".

Beginning on 14 August 1914, the first major French offensive of World War I was launched into the other lost province, Lorraine, which borders Alsace to the north west. As with Alsace, the French assault in Lorraine served as another potentially disastrous adventure. Goodspeed wrote "if Schlieffen rather than Moltke had been German commander-in-chief, this silly French offensive into Lorraine would, in all likelihood, have spelled the defeat of France".

With the French attack on Lorraine set to commence, on the right General Auguste Dubail's French 1st Army was to drive forward in the direction of Strasbourg in Alsace, its right flank protected by a newly formed force, the Army of Alsace, under General Paul Pau. On the French 1st Army's left, General Edouard de Castelnau's French 2nd Army was to capture the commune of Morhange in northern Lorraine.

Almost a third of the entire French Army was committed to an intervention in Lorraine which, even if successful, would bring France no strategic prize. For 4 days from 14 August 1914, the German 6th and 7th armies in Lorraine withdrew as intended before the French, allowing the latter to become committed, while the Germans inflicted heavy casualties on the attackers through their rear guards and artillery strikes. The Germans counterattacked on 20 August, which was a strategic error on their part, for they would have been wiser to allow the French to enter more deeply into the trap.

Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, the German 6th Army commander, had seen the possibility of a tactical victory with a counterattack, and he could not resist the temptation to pursue it. Rupprecht asked the German commander-in-chief, General von Moltke, for permission to counterattack in Lorraine on 20 August. Rupprecht's request was granted with disconcerting ease, showing von Moltke's lack of strategic awareness, a mistake von Schlieffen would not likely have made. Moreover, von Schlieffen had visualised Supreme Headquarters holding all 7 German armies in the field on a tight rein; but von Moltke, based far back at the city of Coblenz in western Germany, exercised a much looser control over his armies.

In Lorraine, the French 1st Army resumed its attack at first light on 20 August 1914, but they were stopped by the Germans, and then driven back in some confusion. The French 2nd Army on the left also came under assault, and the situation there was more serious. Comprising part of the French 2nd Army, General Ferdinand Foch's XX Corps fought brilliantly, and its stand saved the day from complete disaster; but the French centre and right corps panicked and fled from the battlefield, the sort of indiscipline which the Germans had not displayed.

The French 2nd Army retreated to the fortified positions on the Grand Couronné, the heights above Nancy, Lorraine's biggest city. Since the left flank of the French 1st Army was now

exposed, it had to retire to its original starting line on the Meurthe river. The Battle of Lorraine, which lasted for 12 days, concluded in German victory on 25 August 1914. General Joffre was not greatly disheartened by the inability to take Lorraine, along with the sharp defeat there of the French 1st and 2nd armies. The Germans had appeared in greater numbers than anticipated in that area, so they could not be strong everywhere, which is what General Joffre expected.

Slightly further north of Lorraine, beside the Ardennes forest, the French high command calculated that a maximum of 18 German divisions were present there. This was more wishful thinking. Actually, 25 German divisions were operating in the Ardennes region, consisting of the German 4th Army commanded by Albrecht, Duke of Württemberg, and the German 5th Army commanded by Crown Prince, Wilhelm; the latter being the eldest child of the ruling Kaiser, Wilhelm II.

In preparation for the imminent French assault, on the afternoon of 21 August 1914 German troops moved into the fringes of the Ardennes forest, which provided excellent cover. There the Germans waited, preparing ambushes in which to snare the impetuous French attackers. On 22 August the French began their second large-scale offensive, this time towards the Ardennes; with the French 3rd Army on the right commanded by General Pierre Ruffey, and on the left the French 4th Army led by General Langle de Cary. A newly formed Army of Lorraine, under General Michel-Joseph Maunoury, would act as the right-flank guard against a possible German counterattack from the city of Metz, in northern Lorraine.

Very seriously, not only were the French continually underestimating German troop numbers, but neither did they take the trouble of sending out proper reconnaissance sorties in the Ardennes area. The French conduct of battle was therefore based on vain imaginings. They pushed boldly, but blindly, into such areas of the Ardennes called Virton, Ochamps, Rossignol and Neufchâteau, located mainly along the French-Belgian frontier. In these places, as the Battle of the Ardennes began, the advancing French troops entered killing grounds, where they were slaughtered by artillery and rifle fire from the mostly unseen German soldiers.

At the commune of Longwy, at the northernmost edge of Lorraine, a corps in the centre of the French 3rd Army broke to the rear, leaving its 2 adjoining corps isolated and vulnerable, both with open, unguarded flanks. Much the same thing happened in the French 4th Army at Tintigny, in the far south of Belgium beside the Ardennes.

Most French soldiers fought with courage, but it is undeniable that the French Army was failing in the test of war against the well organised Germans. An emphasis on flair and spirit (*élan*) pervaded the French military ranks, often at the expense of following sound and prosaic details of warfare. Even Napoleon Bonaparte had very occasionally committed blunders in his career but he would not, of course, have sent his soldiers into potential deathtraps without firstly discovering the lay of the land. Unfortunately for the French, Joseph Joffre was no Napoleon Bonaparte.

It was the case too, after the Franco-Prussian War, that something of an inferiority complex permeated French thought regarding the Germans. They tried to overcome this unpleasant feeling, by stressing the need for *élan* among their troops and a desire for revenge against Germany, which they hoped would overcome any deficiencies. By 1914 the German population had risen to 67 million, while the French population was 40 million; the German birth rate was increasing further and the French birth rate was dropping; even worse,

Germany had become a stronger industrial state than France; in 1914 Germany was the 2nd most powerful nation in the world, behind the United States.

France, once the dominant country in mainland Europe, had been regressing as a power for a century before the First World War. General Charles de Gaulle said, "Napoleon's disastrous decision to attack Alexander I [of Russia] is the biggest mistake he ever made. Nothing obliged him to do so. It was against our interests, our traditions, our genius. Our decline dates back to the war between Napoleon and the Russians".

In the meantime, the Battle of the Ardennes was quickly descending into a massacre. On 22 August 1914, a tragic loss of life occurred as 27,000 French soldiers were killed, the single most bloodstained day in the history of the French Army. With the attacking forces having gained no ground, the Battle of the Ardennes concluded in German victory on 23 August, lasting in all for a couple of days. Total French casualties were unsustainable, amounting to 42,557, almost 3 times that of German casualties of 14,940.

It was far too soon in the war for French commanders to lose faith in the offensive, but the frontline soldiers were learning better. By 23 August 1914, after less than 3 weeks of fighting, France's war strategy (Plan XVII) lay in ruins. The French Army was already losing men at a rate it could not afford, while it was becoming clear that the weight of the German advance was falling through Belgium and northern France, west of the Meuse river.

The French left flank was now so endangered that General Joffre could no longer ignore the threat, but he did not suspend the Ardennes offensive until 26 August. General Charles Lanrezac, leading the French 5th Army guarding the extreme left of the French line of battle, knew that between him and the English Channel were only a few hastily prepared units and some cavalry. All of General Lanrezac's instincts told him the main German attack was going to reach far to the west, enveloping his open left flank. An intelligent and perceptive commander, Lanrezac had previously implored the French high command not to send its troops into "that deathtrap of the Ardennes".

Through August 1914, the Germans had the best of both worlds. When they advanced into Belgium and northern France, the countryside was relatively open and provided good marching ground, while they were opposed by inadequate forces; where the Germans reverted to the tactical defence, the French obliged them by unwisely attacking in close country. Thus, the Germans retained the initiative both in offensive and defensive warfare, and the French conformed to their will.

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