

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

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Nineteen fourteen was a terrible year, much worse than the most pessimistic imaginings at the time had forecast, and it was perhaps among the worst years in human history.

During late July and early August 1914, in Paris, Berlin, London and Saint Petersburg, crowds lined the streets during the last days of the crisis leading up to the First World War, which officially began on 28 July 1914. Some among the marchers sang patriotic songs, demonstrated in front of enemy embassies, and committed random acts of violence.

Those who had desired the conflict, and those who had dreaded it, found their tensions released with the declarations of war. Some wept to see the lamps going out across Europe heralding the imminent approach of fighting, though these were not in a majority. In all of the warring powers many of the young men especially, oblivious of the carnage lying in store for them on the battlefields, celebrated the dawning of a new world with a sense of awe. Yet it soon became clear to everyone, politicians, the public and to a lesser extent military commanders, that the nature of modern, industrialised warfare had been sorely misunderstood.

It was thought by most that the war would be decided within a few months, before Christmas 1914 even, and that no nation’s economy could handle the strain of a prolonged war. There were other fanciful beliefs that combat was to be conducted in the classical sense, with cavalry screens and wide-wheeling masses of manoeuvre. Such were the technological advances that mankind had made by the early 20th century, many decades into the industrial age, that the old-style forms of war were primarily defunct, and the new form was infinitely more deadly.

In 1915 for example, the French Army would suffer 1,624,000 casualties. By comparison in 1915 the German Army had incurred 873,200 casualties, amounting to less than 54% of French casualties; which gives an indication of the superiority of the Germans over the French, and during a period when German forces were simultaneously fighting against the massive Russian Army in the East.

That was into the future. In the early morning of 4 August 1914, the Germans invaded neutral Belgium. They attacked towards the city of Liège in eastern Belgium, located less than 25 miles from the German border. Germany's invasion of Belgium, a lawless and aggressive action, drew much condemnation from the French and British among others. Not mentioned was that France had until 1912 been planning an attack on Belgium at the outbreak of hostilities, and only that year the French had abandoned the notion out of consideration for England's attitude, and not out of consideration for the Belgians.

Furthermore, on 5 October 1915 France and Britain invaded neutral Greece, which was of course against the wishes of the Greeks who wanted to stay out of the war, as had the Belgians. The Anglo-French invasion of Greece was a very similar example of unlawful aggression to the German invasion of Belgium. Yet the reactions in Paris and London to the attack on Greece a year later were quite different.

Greece was not pivotal to Anglo-French war aims, whereas the German advance into Belgium, a strategically placed country which borders Germany to the west, was viewed with good reason by Berlin's militarists as crucial to a German victory in the war. On 4 August 1914 the German chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, publicly acknowledged his country's guilt in assaulting Belgium. Addressing the Reichstag (parliament) he called it "a breach of international law" and continued "The wrong - I speak openly - the wrong we hereby commit we will try to make good as soon as our military aims have been attained".

An invasion of Belgium was formulated almost a decade prior to 1914 by the German field marshal, Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, as part of his strategy known as the Schlieffen Plan. Field Marshal von Schlieffen, who died aged 79 in January 1913, had planned another illegal offensive against the neutral Netherlands, through Maastricht in the far south of the Netherlands, but Germany spared the Dutch such a fate in 1914.

The German advance into eastern Belgium, meanwhile, was continuing from its opening phase, as they assailed the country starting with 6 regular brigades and 2 cavalry divisions. The German plan was for a rapid and surprise attack (coup de main) against Liège and its fortifications, comprising largely of a dozen late 19th century forts, believed to be among the strongest on the European continent.

On 7 August, just 4 days into the offensive, a 49-year-old German commander, Major-General Erich Ludendorff, forced his way into Liège's city centre and took the surrender of the Citadel of Liège, the city's main fortification which had been built in the mid-13th century. This act earned Ludendorff the nickname among Germans as "The Hero of Liège", and it set him on the path to supreme power in 1916; but at the moment, Ludendorff's capture of the Citadel was more symbolic than strategic, as the 12 forts nearby were still intact and manned by Belgian troops.

With the Citadel neutralised the German government announced, wrongly, that Liège had fallen. Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg, his conscience again uneasy, tried in vain to stop the fighting in Belgium. There was little chance of that, and the Belgian garrison in Liège was defending the city with gallantry; they were inflicting considerable casualties on the enemy, who unwisely chose to attack frontally against the entrenched Belgian riflemen.

Late on 9 August 1914, day 6 of the invasion, an unusual sight appeared over the horizon. The Germans were moving towards Liège their heavy siege guns; such as the 10 metre long

Big Bertha, which weighed more than 40 tons and was built in high secrecy by the Krupp steel company, one of the world's most technically advanced armament firms.

The Big Bertha siege howitzers could reach a target from almost 6 miles away. It fired a shell containing a maximum weight of 1,785 pounds (810 kg), which ensured that Big Bertha could penetrate concrete and soil up to a depth of 40 feet. Each shell could be fired every 7 and a half minutes, or 8 an hour. By the evening of 12 August 1914, the first German siege gun was securely in place, and ready to crack the Belgian forts as a spoon breaks apart an egg. Even before the 12th of August, German infantry took by storm 2 of Liège's 12 forts, Barchon and d'Evegnée.

The Germans began loading Big Bertha, and the barrel of the giant gun was then pointed at Fort Pontisse. A tremendous roar rang out as Big Bertha's first shell struck Fort Pontisse, to be followed in synchronisation by more. The fort was completely destroyed by 12:30 pm the following day, 13 August. Over the next 2 days, 6 more of Liège's forts were reduced to rubble; the last of these, Fort Loncin, was blown to smithereens after one of Big Bertha's shells scored a direct hit against live ammunition in the fort. The remaining 2 forts surrendered to the Germans without a fight on 16 August 1914. So ended the Battle of Liège after 12 days of bloody fighting.

Shortly after its invasion of Belgium had commenced, sections of the German Army were perpetrating hysterical and brutal acts against the populace. Some Belgian villages were reduced to ashes, hostages were executed, the city of Louvain in central Belgium with its famous libraries was destroyed, priests attending to the wounded were shot out of hand, while a compassionate English nurse, Edith Cavell, was killed the following year (12 October 1915) by a German firing squad for helping prisoners to escape. In all, German soldiers were directly responsible for the deaths of an estimated 5,521 Belgian civilians and 896 French civilians.

In the early days of the war the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, wrote a letter to his Austrian counterpart Franz Joseph which ran, "My soul is torn, but everything must be put to fire and sword; men, women and children and old men must be slaughtered and not a tree or house be left standing. With these methods of terrorism, which are alone capable of affecting a people as degenerate as the French, the war will be over in two months, whereas if I admit considerations of humanity it will be prolonged for years. In spite of my repugnance I have therefore been obliged to choose the former system".

At the front, German soldiers culpable in criminal actions justified their behaviour by claiming they had firstly been attacked by franc-tireurs, that is armed civilian, guerrilla fighters or snipers. In isolated cases there may have been a grain of truth to this but how did they, an invading army, expect to be received in neutral Belgium, with flowers and cheering on the streets? In his war memoirs written in 1919 Ludendorff, in contrast to the Kaiser, does not seem to have had a soul that is torn. Ludendorff blamed the Belgian authorities for what he admitted were the "sternest measures" taken by the Germans.

Recalling his time in Liège in the first days of the war, Ludendorff wrote, "During the night I was awakened by brisk firing, some of which was directed on our house. The franc-tireur warfare of Belgium had begun. It broke out everywhere the next day, and it was this sort of thing which aroused that intense bitterness that during those first years characterized the war on the Western front, in contrast to the feeling prevailing in the East. The Belgian

Government took a grave responsibility upon itself. It had systematically organized civilian warfare... our troops cannot be blamed if they took the sternest measures to suppress it. It is true that innocent persons may have had to suffer, but the stories of 'Belgian atrocities' are nothing but clever, elaborate, and widely advertised legends, and the Belgian Government can alone be held responsible".

Though Ludendorff possessed physical courage and was regarded as one of Germany's best staff officers, he was also a ruthless soldier and an imperialist already displaying fascist tendencies; he did not shirk from violence if he felt it had to be used.

Belgian historian Sophie de Schaepdrijver wrote "the victims were accused, incorrectly, of being franc-tireurs. Most of the German rank and file genuinely believed that the locals were attacking them; this sniper delusion was sometimes countered by the commanding officers, sometimes not".

The German attack on Belgium was broadening in scope. On 14 August 1914, before Liège had fallen, the right wing of the German invasion force was entering Belgium. Crossing the German-Belgian frontier was the German 1st Army under General Alexander von Kluck, and the German 2nd Army under General Karl von Bülow. Both von Kluck and von Bülow, each aged 68, were highly experienced officers. The two men had seen action in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

German mobilisation was completed on 13 August 1914, meaning that the Belgian Army's defence of Liège had in total delayed Germany's western advance for a few hours, if at all, contrary to what has often been claimed. In the first 15 days of marching through August the German 1st Army, consisting of 6 corps, met little opposition across the Belgian countryside. They advanced about 180 miles in 2 weeks of hard marching. The German 1st Army in the process captured the Belgian capital city, Brussels, on 20 August 1914.

Five days before that, on 15 August advance units of the German 3rd Army - under General Max Klemens von Hausen - had reached the Meuse river at the city of Dinant, in southern Belgium, beside the French border and 150 miles from Paris. The first attempts of the German 3rd Army, to establish a crossing over the Meuse river, were beaten back by the Belgians.

Elsewhere, the German effort was foiled of cutting off and destroying the Belgian field army on the Gette river, by preventing the Belgians from seeking refuge in the city of Antwerp, in northern Belgium. The Belgian troops had no intention of sitting on the Gette river line and being wiped out. Regardless, one Belgian division was caught napping on the Gette, and it suffered 1,600 casualties against the Germans before it could break away.

By 20 August 1914 the Belgian forces were safely in Antwerp, except for the 4th Division, which was still stationed in the city of Namur in central Belgium. Also on 20 August, after a few days of frustration, the German 3rd Army forced a crossing of the Meuse river at Dinant to the south. By 25 August, Namur further north had been captured by the Germans. Belgium's position was desperate, and the roads through the country were wide open.

Had the Schlieffen Plan been executed as originally devised by Field Marshal von Schlieffen, with the all important German right wing "brushing the sleeve of the [English] Channel", the Germans could have now walked unopposed into the heartland of France. Yet the Schlieffen Plan, specifically relating to the German right wing, had been weakened and the strategy

altered by General Helmuth von Moltke (The Younger), who in January 1906 had succeeded von Schlieffen as Chief of the German General Staff.

Von Moltke did not possess as sharp a military brain as his predecessor; he did not perceive the Schlieffen Plan's intricacies. To his death, von Schlieffen had stressed that the right wing of the German Army was to be "as strong as possible", and he allotted 79 divisions to comprise of this right wing.

Von Schlieffen had designated just 9 divisions and some Landwehr (militia) forces to the German left wing, which was to occupy positions from Metz in north-eastern France to the Swiss border, around 150 miles to the south of Metz. Yet von Moltke, instead, assigned most of the new divisions that became available between 1906 and 1914 to the German left wing! The truth was that von Moltke had also lost confidence in the Schlieffen Plan, and in the back of his mind he was preparing for a longer war by cutting down on short-term risks; but as it turned out, von Moltke was significantly increasing the overall risk to Germany.

It should be mentioned, too, that von Moltke was later supporting the criminal activities of some German troops in Belgium and France. On 5 August 1914, the 66-year-old von Moltke wrote to the Austrian commander Conrad von Hötzendorf, "Our advance in Belgium is certainly brutal, but we are fighting for our lives and all who get in the way must take the consequences". A week later, in a statement of 12 August, von Moltke further justified such actions by warning Belgium and France that it was "in the nature of such things that [countermeasures] will be extraordinarily harsh and even, under some circumstances, affect the innocent".

Returning to the Schlieffen Plan, in the East von Schlieffen had allotted 10 German divisions in which to guard East Prussia against the initial advance of the Russian Army; which would take a few weeks to materialise, due to the inevitable lengthy mobilisation process relating to the Russian Army's large size, and the difficulty of the ground that the Russians would have to traverse across; such as their having to avoid the Masurian Lakes of central Europe and extensive marshy terrain nearby.

Von Moltke judged that the Schlieffen Plan was a great gamble, which it certainly was, but his attempts to improve it and make it less so injured rather than enhanced its prospects of success. Von Schlieffen had concluded that Germany needed a quick, decisive battle of annihilation in the West, and that this was possible only if the enemy could be outflanked and enveloped. Von Schlieffen, a student of military history, regarded Hannibal's crushing victory over the Romans at Cannae, in the year 216 BC, as the perfect example of this type of military operation.

Von Schlieffen envisaged that the German right wing - which would consist of the bulk of the German Army - would pass through Belgium and northern France, cross the Seine river just above Rouen in the Normandy region, sweep around Paris to the west and south, and thereupon smash the French Army back against the Swiss frontier, like a hammer striking an anvil. With the French and their ally Britain knocked out of the war within the expected 6 weeks, the Germans would turn east with all of their remaining forces and overcome the Russian Army; which by then would be at Germany's eastern boundaries. That is how von Schlieffen foresaw victory for his country in the war.

From a purely military viewpoint the Schlieffen Plan was an excellent strategy, and very bold, but not without its flaws. Germany would have fewer men than needed for the tasks at

hand. The margin of time would be very small between the campaigns in the West and East. An extended delay in the West would probably be fatal for Germany's chances in the war, as indeed proved the case. Germany's location on the map in central Europe, flanked on either side by enemies, had always placed her in a vulnerable position in a major European war. France had the luxury of being protected on its left flank, by either the Atlantic Ocean or the English Channel.

On 16 August 1914 the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), of 4 divisions and a cavalry division, had crossed the English Channel and disembarked without interference at Le Havre in northern France. On 22 August the British forces, commanded by Field Marshal John French, finally reached Mons in western Belgium, where they took up a position on the left of the French 5th Army, commanded by General Charles Lanrezac. As the British soldiers marched along the dusty roads, they sang a popular music-hall song "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", named after the county of Tipperary in Ireland.

The former German chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, had said that if British troops ever landed on mainland Europe and attacked Germany, "I shall have the police arrest them". Considering that Britain was a naval power, which did not then have or need a large army, Bismarck's witty comment is understandable.

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