

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

Part III

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The really decisive fighting in the First World War occurred during the opening few weeks of the conflict having broken out. The war’s outcome rested on the success or failure of the German Empire’s Schlieffen Plan, named after its principal strategist Alfred Graf von Schlieffen.

Yet von Schlieffen, at age 72, had retired late in 1905 as the German Army’s commander-in-chief (Chief of the German General Staff). His immediate successor was General Helmuth von Moltke, a less capable soldier. He would still be commander-in-chief when war erupted in the summer of 1914.

Von Moltke had never desired to lead the German Army, with the heavy responsibilities that it entailed. In December 1905 he informed Kaiser Wilhelm II, “I lack the power of rapid decision. I am too reflective, too scrupulous and, if you like, too conscientious for such a post”. These comments should have disqualified him from the position. Undeterred, the Kaiser insisted that he wanted him because of the famous Moltke name. His uncle Helmuth von Moltke the Elder was a well regarded 19th century field marshal. In pushing von Moltke into the commander-in-chief role, the Kaiser was unwittingly contributing to the demise of the German Empire.

The Schlieffen Plan called for a powerful and rapid advance of the German Army westward – mostly through Belgium and northern France – resulting in the planned destruction of the Belgian, French and British forces within the allotted 6 weeks. Having accomplished that the German divisions, as outlined by the Schlieffen Plan, would then march eastwards to engage and destroy the huge Russian Army; which by September 1914 would be at Germany’s eastern borders.

If the Schlieffen Plan’s first critical stage was to fail, that is should the Germans prove unable to swiftly eliminate the Western allies, the implications of a war on two fronts were

obvious, at least to Berlin's military command. The German Army generals were painfully aware their soldiers would be unlikely to win the dreaded two-front war, against some of the world's strongest and most heavily populated countries.

As it turned out, the Schlieffen Plan was running almost exactly on schedule in its opening phase, following the German invasion of neutral Belgium launched on 4 August 1914. The early success of the Schlieffen Plan on the field of battle was mainly due to "extraordinarily efficient staff work", according to military author Lt. Col. Donald J. Goodspeed. Moreover, the invention of the giant siege howitzer (Big Bertha) by Germany's armament firm, the Krupp steel company, was crucial to the German conquest of the fortress city of Liège in eastern Belgium. Liège's 19th century forts were reduced to rubble by Big Bertha's shells, with Liège falling on 16 August 1914 after 12 days of fighting.

This opened the way for the German armies to progress at relative ease into the heartland of Belgium, a country smaller than Switzerland. Beyond Liège, most of Belgium's terrain was empty of Belgian troops and devoid of defensive fortifications. This presented near-perfect marching ground for the German troops, who for miles at a time could see before them nothing but flat countryside, dotted by picturesque Belgian villages. German mobilisation of all of its forces was completed on 13 August 1914. This meant the Belgian Army's defence of Liège, though gallant, had delayed the German Army's advance for "only a few hours, if at all", Goodspeed wrote. At the time, and since, it was claimed in France and Britain that the Belgians had critically stalled the German Army in Liège, but this was not the case.

Two days before Liège had collapsed, on 14 August the vitally important right wing, consisting of the bulk of the German Army, started entering Belgium. Leading the right wing were the German 1st Army commanded by General Alexander von Kluck, and the German 2nd Army led by General Karl von Bülow. These two armies comprised of 12 corps amounting to almost 600,000 soldiers.

The German 1st and 2nd armies had the furthest to go, which is why they moved first out of the right wing; the 1st and 2nd armies were tasked with advancing south-westwards through Belgium, entering northern France, wheeling back around the "gigantic fortress" of Paris, surrounding and taking the French capital with a detachment of 6 or 7 German corps; thereafter moving south of Paris to destroy the French Army in the field in a vast enveloping manoeuvre, similar to Hannibal's encircling movement and victory against the Romans at Cannae, in the year 216 BC.



German soldiers on the way to the front in 1914; at this stage, all sides expected the conflict to be a short one. (Licensed under the public domain)

To the rear and left of the German 1st and 2nd armies was the German 3rd Army (General Max Klemens von Hausen), the German 4th Army (Duke Albrecht of Württemberg) and the German 5th Army (Crown Prince Wilhelm). These latter armies were each requested to advance more slowly than the German 1st and 2nd armies. The march south-westwards, through Belgium and towards the Paris region, was not to begin until the German 1st Army captured Brussels, the Belgian capital city, located in central Belgium. In little more than 2 weeks of marching, the German 1st Army advanced an impressive 180 miles across Belgian soil.

Even for the German 1st Army's forward cavalry guards, there was hardly any fighting during that fortnight. On 17 August 1914, the Belgian government had fled Brussels. Three days later, the German 1st Army reached Brussels and captured the city unopposed. By now, 20 August, the greater part of Belgium's army had retired to the north of the country, where it found refuge in the city of Antwerp. Also on 20 August the German 3rd Army, following a few failed attempts, had established a crossing over the Meuse river at the city of Dinant in southern Belgium.

After 10 days of fighting, the German 3rd Army defeated the French forces in the Battle of Dinant, capturing the city on 24 August 1914. With Dinant secured, the Germans were positioned 150 miles from Paris as the crow flies. By 25 August, a feeling of unease was permeating through Paris and much of northern France. Less than 20 miles north of Dinant, the city of Namur fell on 25 August, and the roads through Belgium were at the Germans' mercy.

Already on 23 August, a Sunday, the German 1st Army was bearing down on the city of Mons in western Belgium, near to where was stationed the French 5th Army (General Charles Lanrezac) and the British Expeditionary Force (Field Marshal John French). On the morning of 23 August, many of the Belgian locals in Mons and the outlying villages went to

church as usual, oblivious to the rapidly approaching German 1st Army.

The Germans reached Mons on the mid-morning of 23 August, breaking the deceptive tranquillity. The German 1st Army commander, General von Kluck, unwisely chose in his initial assault on Mons to pursue a head-on battle against the British Expeditionary Force; rather than, what he should really have done, to outflank the British and possibly force them to surrender or retreat. The advancing Germans suffered considerable casualties in the first frontal attacks, as they were driven back by well-aimed British rifle fire.

The British commander, John French, was pleased with how the opening skirmishes had gone; but he was not privy to the sheer numbers of the enemy that opposed him, which exceeded the many tens of thousands of troops, and not merely the thousands which he presumed. The Western allies were hindered by unreliable intelligence reports. French pilots were untrained in aerial reconnaissance, making serious errors not only in map reading but also in identifying enemy troops on the ground.

What useful reports the French airmen did issue were anyway generally disregarded. This was not chiefly because the Anglo-French military leaders distrusted the new service of aircraft, though such sentiment was present, but largely because they were aware of the pilots' lack of training, and that they could not be counted on. After some previous failed attempts, the airplane had been successfully invented late in 1903 in the United States, barely a decade before the war in Europe erupted.

While Field Marshal French, through no fault of his own, was unaware of the weight of the German advance, his ally General Lanrezac commanding the French 5th Army was fearing the worst. His senses rightly told him there were enormous German forces before them. On the night of 23 August 1914, just hours after the German assault against Mons had begun, Lanrezac sent out orders that his army will retreat southwards from the Mons region to northern France, in order to avoid the threat of encirclement.

As would occur in 1940, resentment was emerging between the French and British in 1914. Goodspeed wrote, "What Sir John French could not take into account was that Lanrezac would retreat from his positions that night [23-24 August], without troubling to inform the British on his left until a short time before the retirement. When the British learned at midnight that the French were pulling out in an hour or two, they had no choice but to do the same. Nor did Sir John French desire to stay any longer. He was utterly disgusted with Lanrezac's behavior, and felt that he had been badly let down by his ally".

When Field Marshal French arrived at Lanrezac's headquarters the day before, 22 August, he quickly perceived the French disarray. He was informed by Lanrezac that, on 21 August, the French 5th Army had lost to the Germans the crossings on the Sambre river, which flows through southern Belgium and northern France. This was grave news. The French suffered approximately 30,000 casualties in the Battle of the Sambre, or Battle of Charleroi as it is more commonly known, as opposed to about 11,000 German casualties.

Field Marshal French initially wanted to stay in Mons and continue the fight; but now, having no faith in Lanrezac who was retreating, he announced that he intended to withdraw 400 miles south-westwards to Saint Nazaire in western France, on the Atlantic coast, where the Royal Navy was stationed. Field Marshal French's reaction was over-the-top and Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, was greatly disturbed to hear of his commander's drastic action, as were the British cabinet. Lord Kitchener travelled to France

by destroyer, to impress upon Field Marshal French the importance of maintaining good relations with France's hierarchy, and to conform with "the movements of the French Army".

The British Expeditionary Force landed in France as recently as 16 August 1914. The reality is that the French were architects of their own troubles. Their war strategy completed in February 1914, overseen by commander-in-chief Joseph Joffre and titled Plan XVII, suited the Germans to such a degree one could be forgiven for thinking the Kaiser had drawn it up in his palace.

From the outset of the French campaign on 7 August 1914, their offensives were directed into their former provinces of Alsace and Lorraine – which the Germans had annexed in 1871 – located beside the border of Switzerland and which held no possible strategic importance. About 30% of the French Army's entire manpower strength was committed to the Alsace-Lorraine offensives, which that August of 1914 ended in German victories and threatened the total defeat of France. The German Army high command had, for years, counted on the French entering Alsace-Lorraine at the outbreak of fighting; it was a core component of the Schlieffen Plan.

Even worse, slightly further north of Alsace-Lorraine the French initiated another suicidal attack in the Ardennes forest area, along the frontier of France and Belgium, terrain ideally suited to defending. The Battle of the Ardennes turned into a bloodbath as the Germans, camouflaged in the forest, inflicted more than 40,000 casualties against the advancing French 3rd and 4th armies, over the space of just a couple of days (21–23 August 1914).

As August 1914 was reaching its latter stages, the Allied retreat continued all along the front west of Verdun, a city in north-eastern France located 140 miles east of Paris. The British Expeditionary Force fell back from Mons to French soil. On 26 August, the British II Corps from the Expeditionary Force held its ground and fought at the commune of Le Cateau, in the far north of France, 110 miles from Paris. The Battle of Le Cateau, which concluded on the same day it started, resulted in a convincing German victory on paper. It saw the British II Corps suffer 7,812 casualties, more than twice that of the enemy. At Le Cateau, the Germans made devastating use of their artillery from concealed locations against the British troops.

Three days later, on 29 August, Lanrezac's French 5th Army fought a delaying action against von Bülow's German 2nd Army, at city of Guise, a mere 100 miles north of Paris. The Germans prevailed over 2 days of bloody fighting; still, the engagement in Guise delayed the German 2nd Army's advance by 36 hours through to 30 August. Yet it seemed the Germans were edging relentlessly towards the Paris region.

At the end of August 1914, the unease which gripped Paris was descending to panic in some quarters. This feeling was certainly afflicting the Raymond Poincaré government; which, over the past 2 years, had worked consistently hard for a major European war they expected would restore Alsace and Lorraine to French control. In August 1912 prime minister Poincaré had been informed by Alexandre Millerand, the minister of war, that the French Army high command believed the map of Europe would probably be redrawn in France's favor, in the event of a continental war.

Poincaré, who then assumed the French presidency early in 1913, had been born in Lorraine in 1860. He never forgave the Germans for taking the land of his birth. Poincaré said in public that his generation "had no reason for existence other than the hope of recovering

the lost provinces". The only way to recover them was through a general European war, as Poincaré and his colleagues of course knew.

Regarding the almost 2 million Alsace-Lorraine residents in 1914, it is difficult to ascertain their exact loyalties, whether to France or Germany. However, the historian Elizabeth Vlossak highlighted, "In general, the war was greeted in Alsace-Lorraine with indifference". This suggests a lack of desire on the part of the population there to reunite with France. Vlossak wrote further that Alsace-Lorraine "became an important symbol in French and other Allied wartime propaganda".

It is interesting to note after Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France in 1919, there was a strong separatist movement in the region between 1924 and 1929, with its advocates wanting reunion with Germany. Alsace-Lorraine was a mostly German-speaking territory, where fewer than 15% of its people spoke French as a first language in the early 20th century.

Now with the Germans approaching the gates of Paris, on 31 August 1914 the Poincaré government ingloriously departed the capital, and relocated over 300 miles southward to Bordeaux. They presumably chose Bordeaux because of its position beside the Atlantic, where they would be able to escape France by vessel if the country was defeated by Germany.

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