

# The Schlieffen Plan

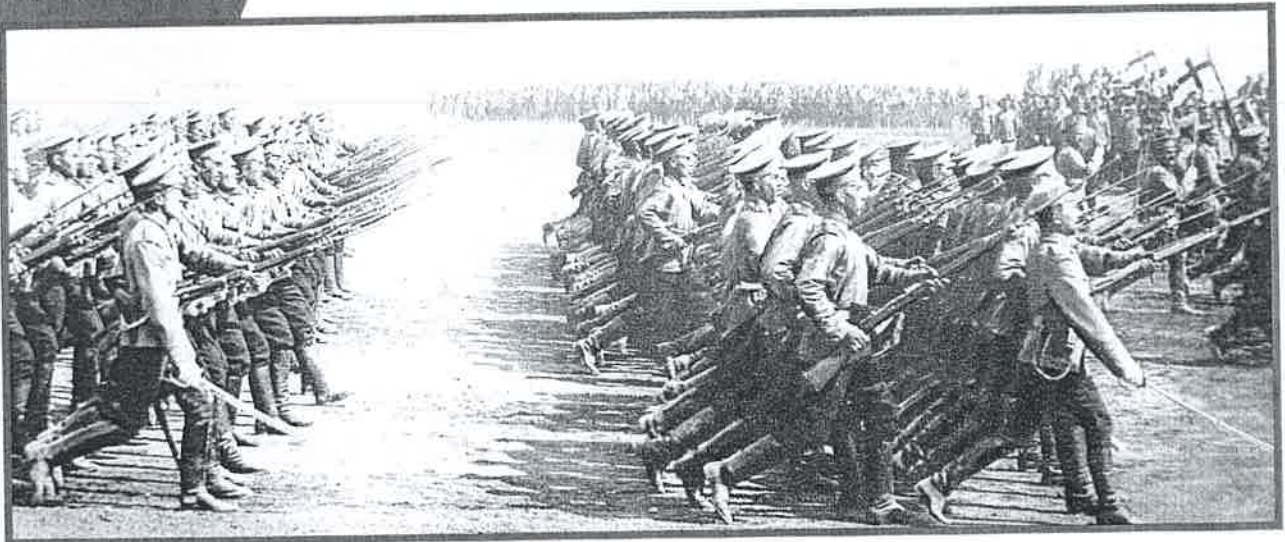
2

Russian troops on parade in 1914. German fears of Russian military strength lay behind the formulation of the Schlieffen plan. The plan was designed to avoid the risk of Germany fighting a war on two fronts.

The **alliance** system meant that a dispute between any two European powers ran the risk of developing into a confrontation all across Europe. Germany made conflict even more likely in 1905 when it secretly adopted a new military strategy known as the Schlieffen plan. After the Franco-Russian alliance, Germany created the plan because it realized that it might have to fight a war on two fronts.

## Waging war on two fronts

The plan was named after Count Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the German general staff and the highest-ranking military commander from 1891 to 1905. As early as 1892, he realized that Germany might have to divide its military forces in the event of a war. One army would be needed to fight the Russians on the nation's eastern border, and another would have to fight the French in the west. The obvious danger was that Germany's forces, weakened by the split, would be crushed like a nut in a nutcracker.



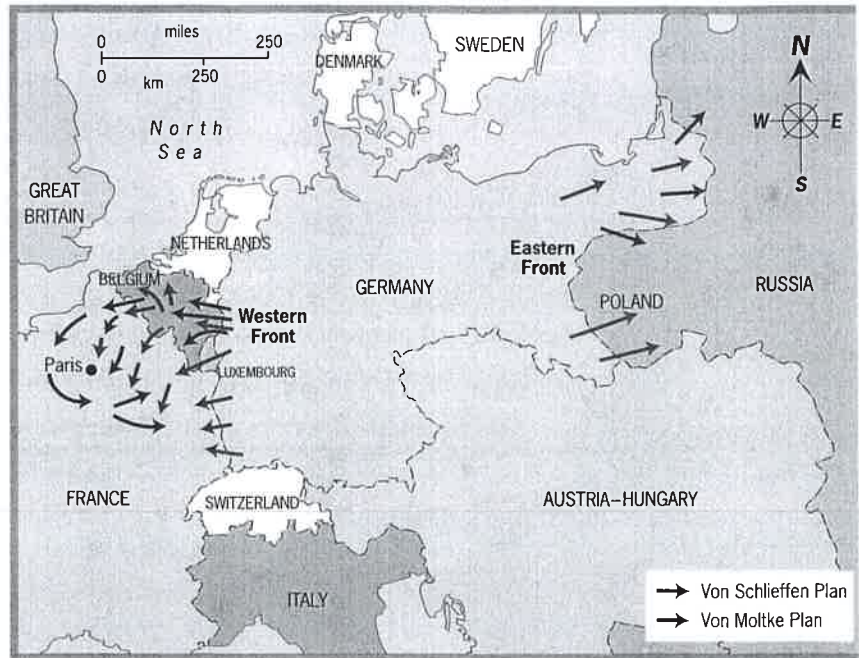
Germany -  
Attack France  
then Russia

Von Schlieffen's solution was based on the idea that attack is often the best form of defense. He knew that Russia, because of its size and its inefficient transportation system, would be slow to **mobilize** in the event of war. The best estimates suggested that the process would take at least **six weeks**. The Schlieffen plan proposed that German forces should take advantage of this delay to deliver a knockout blow to France, the enemy in the west. Then, with France defeated, Germany would be free to concentrate all its armies against Russia on the Eastern Front, where they could use their combined might to bring the Russian steamroller to a halt.

However, France had used the years since the Franco-Prussian War to build strong defenses along its border with Germany. A chain of fortresses all the way from Luxembourg to Switzerland was erected to prevent just such an attack. To overcome this problem, the Schlieffen plan proposed bypassing this frontier altogether. Instead, German forces would invade France through Belgium and attack the country's northern frontier. The plan was very specific as to which targets should be reached and taken for each day that it was in operation. The invading army had to keep to a strict timetable, or schedule, if France was to be defeated within the required six weeks.

### An act of aggression

One problem with the plan was that since 1839 Belgium had been a **neutral** country, with its neutrality guaranteed by all the major European powers, including Germany. Because Belgium did not take sides, invading it would therefore be an obvious act of aggression. Yet, the plan's authors were not concerned with this detail. Von Schlieffen and his successors assumed, it seems, that the Belgian people would let the German troops pass through without a fight.



This map shows the planned area of attack on the Eastern and Western fronts as described in the Schlieffen plan. By the time the plan was finally put into action in 1914, changes had been made by the German commander-in-chief, Helmut von Moltke.

When the plan was finally put into action in 1914, however, the Belgians chose instead to resist. The German invasion, along with the attacks on ordinary Belgian civilians, shocked those who up to that point had not taken sides. Germany's invasion of Belgium finally united the people of Great Britain in favor of going to war. The aggression also did much to turn public opinion in the United States against the **Central Powers** and so helped to ensure that when the U.S. did join the conflict, it was on the **Allied** side.

Militarism -  
Strike France then Russia  
The gist of the plan

Quote

General von Schlieffen explained the logic that lay behind his strategy: "Germany must strive . . . first to strike down one of the allies while the other is kept occupied; but then, when the one [enemy] is conquered, it must, by exploiting its railways, bring a superiority of numbers to the other theater of war, which will also destroy the other enemy."