

Which has a bigger effect on history – the plans of the powerful or their mistakes?

By Anaya Sheth

‘Human blunders usually do more to shape history than human wickedness.’ – AJP Taylor

Wicked or not, plans rarely manifest as intended. Frequently, mistakes in the execution of a plan cause it to deviate significantly from its objective. This is best exemplified by the Schlieffen Plan, one of the most influential military strategies of World War One. While the plan’s initial intentions were to ensure a swift German victory against France and Russia, its failure ultimately resulted in a war of attrition, and eventual German defeat. The military plans of the powerful German statesmen were significant, leading to the outbreak of an expansive, multinational war. Yet, the unintended consequences of their mistakes were far more significant, determining the war’s nature and outcome. Hence, albeit the interplay of both plans and mistakes shape history, the latter is far more impactful.

The powerful are those who possess the ability to effect change. In the early 20th century in Germany, such ability was afforded to the German military generals commanding a vast and modern army. Specifically, Alfred von Schlieffen held immense power to influence the militaristic and diplomatic policy of Germany, as the German Army Chief of Staff. Anticipating imminent war in Europe due to escalating geo-political tensions, he devised the Schlieffen Plan: a strategy designed to avert a two-front war for Germany. It intended to swiftly annex France, through Belgium, within six weeks, before fighting Russia on the east.

However, rather than being merely a military operation, the Schlieffen Plan was the apotheosis of German militarism and aggression. As a pre-emptive war strategy, it represented

the German leaders' ambitious goals of achieving European hegemony. The plan became a self-fulfilling prophecy, influencing powerful leaders to take actions that pushed Europe closer to conflict. As argued by historian Ritter, the Plan was a 'disease' in German politics that guided flawed decision-making in the 1900s. As the plan developed, it progressively committed Germany to a gigantic offensive. As a proximate cause in the outbreak of a war of unprecedented scale, the plan's impact is evidently paramount.

Though the Schlieffen Plan was strictly a military strategy, it had an enormous impact on Germany's political framework. Notably, Schlieffen ensured that political authorities were continually cognizant of the plan's aims and requirements. Ritter successfully traced the steps by which the German government was informed of the plan and was induced to consent to the violation of Belgian neutrality by military strategists. This communication from the military to the government established an offensive bias – a predetermined belief that war was imminent, and that it would be best to be on the offensive. Such an opportunity was afforded by the bellicose Schlieffen Plan. According to historians Johnson and Tierney, this offensive bias led to aggressive and risky planning, and the adoption of an implemental mindset among German leaders. For instance, in 1904, the Kaiser expressly asked Belgium to guarantee support of Germany, both politically and logistically, in case of war. He even threatened 'harmful consequences' in absence of their cooperation. This episode indicated that the German government had pre-emptively decided on the violation of Belgian neutrality, long before war's outbreak. The Kaiser's provocative action created a hostile environment in Europe, suited for conflict.

The shift in mindset also affected former German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg. His ambitious foreign policy was revealed in the September Memorandum of 1914 and included annexing most of Europe and setting up a German economic powerhouse through an aggressive

war. His policy could be accredited to his belief in achieving victory through the Schlieffen Plan, of which he was aware long before the war. In hindsight, it is reasonable to conclude that his ulterior motive of achieving European dominance through the Plan caused him to assure the Austrian embassy that Germany would fight against Serbia and Russia on 6th July 1914, during the July Crisis, hoping to commence annexation. The promise of German military support to the modest force of Austria-Hungary in this 'blank cheque' was a key factor in provoking the outbreak of general war, as it instigated Austria to declare war against Serbia. Thus, the plans of the powerful military leaders were impactful in determining the actions of the politicians, and consequently, the onset of war.

Additionally, the Schlieffen Plan ensured that no European crisis could be solved by sensible diplomacy, because of its inherent rigidity, which limited the flexibility in the decision-making of German leaders. Firstly, the plan relied on the assumption that Russia would be slow to mobilise. However, ongoing upgrades in Russia indicated that within a few years, Germany would be militarily inferior, and thus, the potential success of the Schlieffen Plan was threatened. Hence, the situation provided an incentive for an accelerated war path for Germany. Arguably, this hastened disposition prompted the Kaiser to grant a blank cheque to Austria-Hungary, favouring a war sooner rather than later.

Furthermore, the plan's rigidity could also be traced to the strict schedules, and railroad itineraries required for the rapid mobilisation of troops. This stringent plan put events beyond the control of diplomats in the final days of the July Crisis, as presented in historian AJP Taylor's War by Timetable argument. For fear of failing to achieve the Schlieffen Plan, Germany felt compelled to deliver an ultimatum to France on August 1st, 1914, immediately after Germany's declaration of war against Russia, to implement it as soon as possible. Thus,

the plan's impact was immense, escalating a local conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary into a continental one.

Notably, the Schlieffen Plan not only guided the policymaking of German officials, but also the decisions of other European statesmen. For instance, at the Committee of Imperial Defence during the Agadir Crisis in 1911, Churchill stated that 'overwhelming detailed evidence was adduced to show that the Germans had made every preparation for marching through Belgium,' a critical step in the Schlieffen Plan. The establishment of military camps near the frontier, the reticulation of railways and the enormous depots indicated the German intent of aggression. Consequently, the Triple Entente developed paranoia of an impending German attack. In 1912, Britain and France even resumed naval talks, and further strengthened their alliance. Thus, Germany's plans had an immense impact in fuelling the alliance system, and creating a hostile environment in Europe, which favoured the outbreak of a war involving all the Great Powers.

Theoretically, the Schlieffen Plan was infallible, paying much attention to strategic and technical detail. Traditionalist historians called it the 'blueprint for victory,' arguing that if carried out as initially designed, the plan would have achieved overwhelming initial success. However, its practical execution deviated significantly from its original parameters, rendering it an ignominious failure. Post-war writing by concurrent senior German army officials, like Lieutenant-Colonel Foerset, General von Kuhl, and General Froener, blame the miscalculations of von Moltke, Schlieffen's successor, for the failure.

After becoming Chief of Staff in 1906, von Moltke made various alterations to Schlieffen's original plan. Most prominently, this included a redistribution of German troops on each front. Contrary to Schlieffen's plans, von Moltke increased the troops for the defence of Alsace Lorraine by eight divisions, and expanded fortifications in East Prussia. Moreover,

Moltke designated 34 corps for the attack of France via Belgium, while Schlieffen's assessment required 48.5 corps. These decisions had an opportunity cost, as they deviated attention from the main offensive in France and are criticised as the reasons for Germany's failure to rapidly defeat France. Furthermore, Moltke erred when he decided to enter France through only Belgium, excluding Holland, depriving the German army of critical transportation links that would maintain supply lines to the war front. This geographical miscalculation significantly impacted the speed of the German offensive, as it created a bottleneck at the German-Belgian frontier.

Another consequential mistake of the powerful was the underestimation of their enemy. The German military operated on the assumption that Belgium and France could be defeated promptly within six weeks. However, this proved to be an erroneous postulation as they faced strong resistance at the Belgian Front, delaying their offensive. Additionally, the Schlieffen Plan overlooked the potential British entry into the war as it was a guarantor of Belgian neutrality as per the Treaty of London, 1839. When Britain declared war against Germany in August 1914, the rapid mobilisation of BEF troops across the English Channel proved fatal to Germany's offensive. Complemented with France's delivery of reservist forces to the frontline by the Taxis of Marne, these factors enabled a strategic victory for the Allies at the Battle of Marne, 1914, which halted the German advance. This event marked a turning point in the war, indicating the beginning of trench warfare along the Western Front. Thus began a stalemate, condemning Germany to a protracted war of attrition on two-fronts, for which it was not prepared economically, militarily, or psychologically.

Therefore, the ramifications of the German army's series of mistakes, compounded by the strengths of their opponents, caused the failure of the Schlieffen Plan. This had profound impacts for both, the nature and the outcome of the war. The resulting stalemate gave rise to a

total war of attrition, causing severe economic and human losses. By 1918, Germany had spent \$45 billion on the war, and lost nearly 2 million lives to the war effort. In all of Europe, the death toll was 8 million. The unfathomable fatalities coupled with infrastructure disruptions decelerated economic production, leading to lasting and widespread devastation for the continent. The war literally and metaphorically blew up a century's worth of economic advancement in Europe, according to historian Ferguson.

Moreover, the stalemate created circumstances that, in the long-term, favoured the Western Allies, who possessed a greater number of resources to sustain a protracted war effort, especially with the entry of the USA in 1917. In contrast, the Central Powers were disadvantaged, leading to their defeat. Hence, the inadvertent consequences of von Moltke's mistakes determined not only the nature, but the outcome of this conflict. Von Moltke himself arrived at this conclusion, as after exhausted German forces were defeated at the Battle of Marne, he declared to the Kaiser – 'Sir, we have lost the war,' four years before the war's actual conclusion. Thus, it is suggested that the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914 itself determined that Germany would inevitably lose.

Therefore, while it was the plans of the powerful German authorities that caused the outbreak of the war, it was their mistakes that determined its nature, outcome, and consequences. Had the Plan been successful, German predictions at the time suggested that the war would be over within mere months, minimizing the casualties and collateral damage. Yet, the following four dark winters in Europe were a morbid consequence of military miscalculation, and the mistakes of the powerful.

Strikingly, the impact of the mistakes of the Schlieffen Plan were not limited to the first World War, but also transcended to future conflicts, informing future battle plans that learned from von Moltke's errors. For instance, in the opening campaigns of World War Two, German

generals von Manstein and Heinz followed a strategy similar to the Schlieffen Plan on the Western Front. However, they attacked France through both Belgium and Holland, learning from von Moltke's errors. Germany achieved overwhelming success in the initial campaigns of World War Two. Thus, the mistakes of the powerful in the past also shape the plans of the powerful in the future.

To conclude, while the plans of the powerful undoubtedly shape history, it is the unintended consequences of their mistakes that wield a more profound and lasting impact. The Schlieffen Plan serves as a poignant example. The meticulously designed strategy led to the outbreak of a massive war by influencing the ambition and decision-making of Europe's political and military leaders. Yet the critical misjudgements in its execution, including the redistribution of troops, logistical errors, and the underestimation of the enemy, are what were truly responsible for the war's outcome, and the succeeding decades of despair. At last, the blunders of the German military did more to shape history than their wickedly belligerent intentions.

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