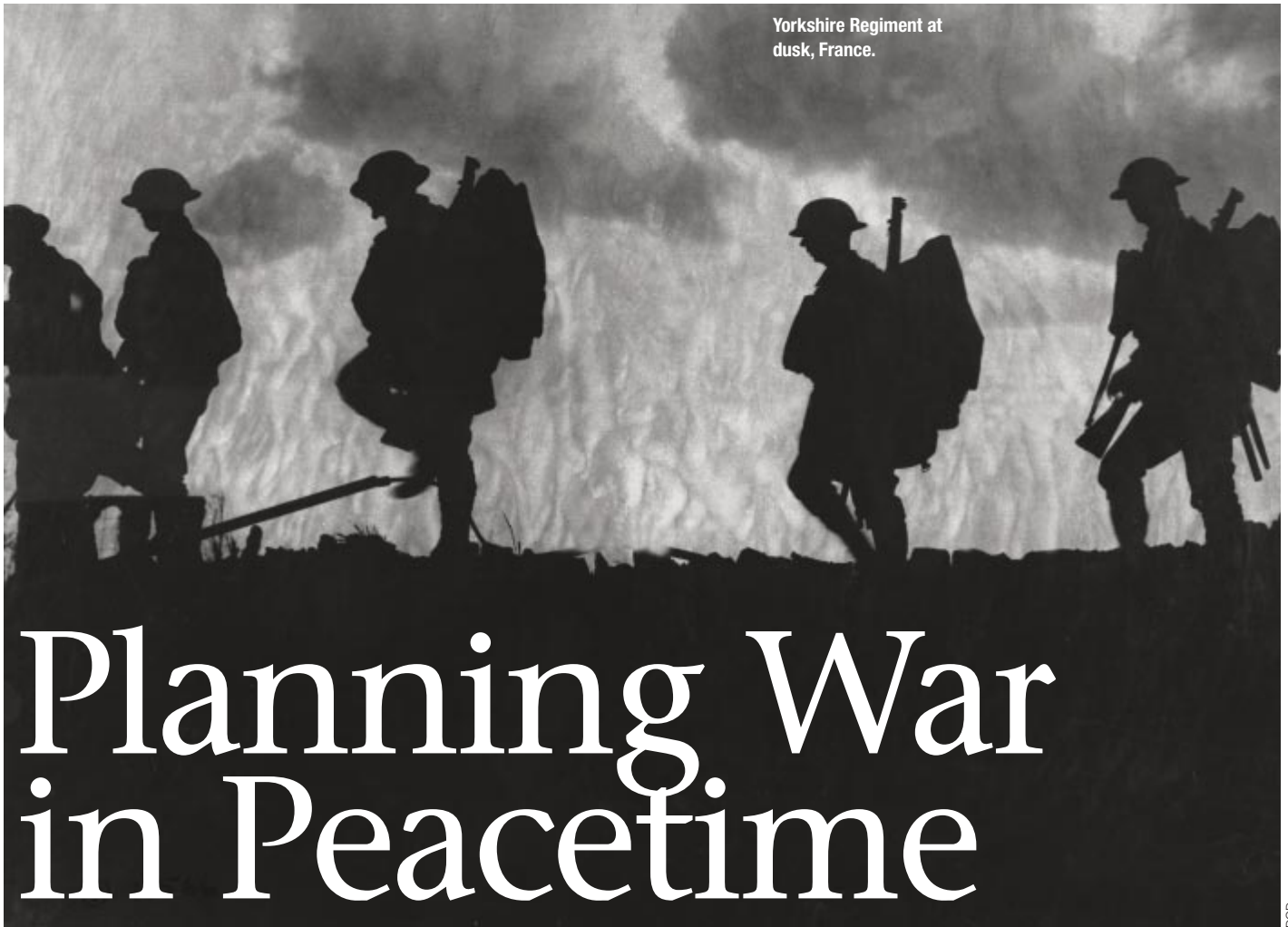


Yorkshire Regiment at dusk, France.



Planning War in Peacetime

By MICHAEL C. DESCH

Many historians, analysts, and policy-makers believe that war plans conceived in peacetime lead to war, despite the wishes of civilian leaders. This is the “Guns of August” school of thought which is prompted by the role of war plans in precipitating World War I. As Sir Basil Liddell Hart has noted, “The statesman may continue to send telegrams, but they are merely waste paper. The military machine has completely taken charge.”¹

War plans may also determine strategy in war. “Those who make or endorse the plans,” as

some observe, “are in effect determining the strategy both for peace and for the opening phases, at least, of a future war; they are giving the commands which really count.”² Extant plans might affect war management under certain circumstances. “When no one knows what to do in a crisis,” Richard Betts commented, “a contingency plan can virtually set the terms and focus the decisional debate. Advocates of an existing plan have an advantage over opponents who do not have one of their own.”³

The historical record shows that while war plans do not actually cause war—civilian political decisions do—they can affect wartime outcomes. The problem is that there is no consensus on exactly how. Thus it makes sense to examine how war planning affects military effectiveness.

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The Kaiser with his generals, 1917.



many regard World War I as evidence that war plans can cause wars

Accidental War

Why should one care about the impact of war planning? The implications of this question are clear: if the views of the Guns of August school are correct, civilian policymakers must be concerned about the nature and content of peacetime plans made by military professionals lest these plans undermine crisis management and lead to accidental wars. Conversely, if Helmut von Moltke (the Elder) was right, that no war plan ever survives contact with the enemy, civilian and military leaders ought to be wary of the fact that substantial resources devoted to peacetime war planning are being wasted because of its irrelevancy.

The general consequences of war plans have not been fully explored, however, because most of the extant literature consists largely of historical studies of individual plans. While many excellent monographs and essays look at the particulars of great power war planning before the World Wars and the Cold War, most fail to derive and test general propositions about the effects of these plans on wartime performance or offer concrete policy recommendations. There has been no attempt to link these inquiries to the larger conceptual debates in the social sciences. One exception was the spurt of interest in the

role of pre-war planning prior to World War I. During the early and mid-1980s scholars examined the origins of that conflict for clues about how World War III might be inadvertently triggered. They also regarded it as an illustration of the spiral model of international relations, which holds that wars often start by accident, in contrast to the reigning deterrence model of the Cold War period, which maintains that they start because one side believes it can gain more by armed conflict than by peace. As will become clear, however, the assessment of the role of war plans in causing World War I in the spiral model, and its generalizations about plans precipitating accidental war in other cases, are flawed. Therefore we do not yet have a persuasive theory about when and how plans matter.

Many regard World War I as evidence that war plans can cause wars. Until recently, it was widely believed that it was an accidental war, at least in terms of the desires of the civilian leaders of the great powers. As Prime Minister David Lloyd George put it, "the nations slithered over the brink into the boiling cauldron of war."⁴ There are two variations on this theme of accidental war: that civilian leaders misperceived the



Adolph Hitler (left),
World War I.

intentions of their neighbors as well as the relative advantages of offensive and defensive military technologies, or that the military organizations of each state ran amok. The bureaucratic interests of such military organizations, particularly maximizing autonomy from civilian control and minimizing uncertainty about the external environment, led to a “cult of the offensive” that glorified war and touted the virtues of striking first. This resulted in a proliferation of tightly coupled offensive war plans among the great powers which transformed another crisis in the Balkans into a world war. As A.J.P. Taylor put it:

It was often said before 1914 that one day the weapons of war would go off by themselves. In 1914 this happened. Though there were no doubt deep-seated reasons for disputes between the great powers, the actual outbreak of World War I was provoked almost entirely by the rival plans for mobilization. . . . [The great powers] were dragged into war by their armies instead of using the armies to further their policies.⁵

This second variant of accidental war is most relevant to the question of whether peacetime war plans can cause war.

The Guns of August view is that the plans of the great powers had a synergistic effect: individually they were wrong-headed; together they were catastrophic. As the story goes, Austria-Hungary, egged on by Germany, rejected a proposal that it cease its punitive operations against Serbia, stopping in Belgrade instead of completely defeating Serbia in response to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo by a Serb nationalist. The unwillingness of Austria-Hungary to halt made war with Russia inevitable. The next link in the chain was the

unwillingness of Russia to consider a partial mobilization against Austria-Hungary in favor of a full mobilization also directed against Germany. This triggered the Schlieffen Plan, expanding the war to Belgium, Britain, and France. The offensive French Plan XVII played into German hands by providing a defensive pretext for attacking France while putting the weight of the French attack at precisely the right spot to make the Schlieffen Plan successful. Finally, since Britain allegedly had no plan to defend Belgium without France, it would be automatically dragged into any Franco-German war. The plans had at least three deleterious effects: they were mutually exclusive (the Russian inability to partially mobilize against only Austria-Hungary); they could not be changed—the Chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke (the Younger), would not agree to refocus his forces against Russia on July 29, 1914, when it seemed Britain might not enter the war; and finally, they were all or nothing (Austria-Hungary rejected the “halt in Belgrade”).⁶ Taken together the plans constituted an infernal machine that produced a world war no one wanted.

Schlieffen Plan

Almost all of these problems were manifest in the Schlieffen Plan. As Gordon Craig noted:

Schlieffen and Moltke devised, and imposed upon the German army, the most rigid operational plan which had ever been accepted by any modern army, and one, moreover, which had dangerous political implications which were never fully understood by the political leaders of Germany or, for that matter, by the soldiers themselves.⁷

The plan was the German military solution to the geostrategic problem of being surrounded by its most likely adversaries, France and Russia. Germany had defeated France in 1871, occupying the Alsace-Lorraine region, and feared revenge. It was also preoccupied with the enormous potential of Russia. Since France and Russia were allies, it would undoubtedly have to fight both nearly simultaneously.

The Chief of the General Staff, Alfred von Schlieffen, arrived at a solution in the first draft of the plan in 1905 that was dictated by geography—France was closer—and technology—Russia could only mobilize slowly, taking at least six weeks. Thus the Schlieffen Plan called for Germany to mobilize in two weeks and then to send seven-eighths of its forces west. The object was to defeat France in less than six weeks and then turn most of its forces against Russia before the bear was awake. To defeat France quickly, Germany had to

German infantry on Belgian front.



attack through Belgium to sidestep the heavily fortified Franco-German border. But to avail itself of Belgium as a gateway to France required seizing the important railhead at Liège on the first day of the war. The Schlieffen Plan and the offensive war plans of the other great powers are the central villains in the accidental origins of World War I.

According to the Guns of August school of thought, the Schlieffen Plan caused civilians to lose control of the military. Craig argued that “the student of German policy in the summer of 1914 cannot help but be struck by the fact that the crucial decisions were made by the soldiers and that, in making them, they displayed an almost complete disregard for political decisions.”⁸ And another student of the war in the definitive study of the scheme argued that “the origin of the Schlieffen Plan cannot be found in political considerations, but exclusively in military technical ones; that it was not the Morocco Crisis of 1905 which brought it to maturity, but strategical studies and the lessons of staff rides going back into the nineties.”⁹

Further, many believe the Schlieffen Plan was irrational and unnecessary: irrational because it never offered a real prospect for success and unnecessary because Germany had other options in the event of war with France and Russia. The great Schlieffen Plan was never a sound formula

for victory. It was a daring gamble that depended on lucky accidents. In addition, it should be noted that Moltke (the Elder) proposed a plan known as *Grosse Ostaufmarsch*, involving a defensive stance in the west and limited offensive in the east. Many Germans found this a far more sensible solution to the geostrategic predicament.

Distorted History

The Guns of August view of World War I is no longer widely accepted. First, there is scant evidence that German civilians—not even the enigmatic Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg—were defensively inclined in 1914, a case made compellingly by Fritz Fischer:

Essentially, German war aims were not merely an answer to the enemy's war aims, as made known in the course of the war, nor the product of the war situation created by the 'beleaguered fortress' and the blockade; they are explicable only in the light of factors operating since 1890 or even earlier—naval policy, the 'policy of bases,' colonial, eastern, Balkan and European economic policies, and the general political situation which—primarily as an effect of Germany's own policy—produced after 1904 and 1907 the attempt to overthrow Germany by 'encircling' her.¹⁰



Council of Four in Paris, 1919.

the plans of the great powers were not as inflexible as often supposed

Utilizing archival sources unavailable to earlier scholars, Fischer found general support for a war to change the status quo among the military and civilian elites. The evidence includes enthusiasm expressed by civilians for *weltpolitik*, a policy to establish Germany as a world power which took root in the 1890s. That the nationalist right and some industrialists would support such a policy is unsurprising; but even Liberal intellectuals such as Max Weber and eventually most of the Social Democrats rallied to the cause. More controversially, some of Fischer's students claimed that there was evidence that leaders such as the Kaiser explicitly

planned for war at least two years before the fact. Whether one accepts that view, Fischer convincingly shows that Hollweg, later an advocate of a moderate peace, initially supported a war of annexation. His proof is the so-called September Program of annexations formulated in 1914. The Guns of August view is hard to sustain given Fischer's revelations. As one observer points out, "One of the most striking features of the general image of World War I as an inadvertent conflict is the extent to which it ignores the arguments of Fritz Fischer and other historians who contend that Germany adopted an aggressive policy and deliberately provoked World War I."¹¹

Moreover, the plans of the great powers were not as inflexible as often supposed. Changes that Moltke made in the Schlieffen Plan show it was not set in concrete. Similarly, it is now known that the British had two contingency plans for defending Belgium: WF (with the French) and WB (with the Belgians). One analyst has argued that Britain went to war because its leaders were committed to maintaining the continental balance of power and concludes that British "plans only helped, only removed the need to improvise. They did not compel."¹² Likewise other scholars have concluded that even if Russia had initiated only a partial mobilization it would not have averted war.

There is little evidence that civilian leaders lost control of their militaries prior to the war, even in the case of Germany. The Kaiser was not forced into war during the first Moroccan Crisis of 1905–06 despite Schlieffen's effort to force the matter. In fact the Kaiser ended up retiring him. Similarly there is evidence that civilians, including Hollweg, knew the details of the plan. Finally, historians have laid to rest the idea that the German military was in charge during the July crisis.

Likewise the offensive war plans were not as irrational as the Guns of August school contends. Russia needed to fully mobilize, given its limited rail capacity and territorial mobilization system and evidence that Germany and Austria-Hungary were indissolubly connected. Still others make a compelling case that France and Russia needed offensive strategies to fulfill their alliance commitments to each other.¹³ Moreover, just because the Schlieffen Plan did not work does not indicate that it was irrational. Given its geographic position and political objective of overturning the status quo, Germany had few alternatives. And as will become clear, the original plan had a good chance of initial success.

The most damaging evidence against the claim that the war was accidental is the discovery that much of the supporting material was manufactured by the Germans in the years that followed. The myth was fostered by a special office (*Kriegsschuldreferat*) within the Foreign Ministry which sought to minimize war guilt. The result was that "the history upon which [the 1914] analogy was based has been distorted. It serves no purpose to continue to believe that Europe 'slid' into war unknowingly in 1914, and that fate or providence alone designed this cruel course of events."¹⁴

Offensive Plans

World War II challenges another prediction of the Guns of August school, that defensive war plans make conflict unlikely. Adolph Hitler, an offensively-oriented leader, had a defensively-oriented military, which only reluctantly formulated offensive plans. He was committed to going to

French gun crew near
Argentan, 1937.



National Archives

war long before his military had such plans. He expressed his intention as early as 1924: “Only when the Germans have taken all this fully into account will they cease from allowing the national will-to-life to wear itself out in merely passive defence, but they will rally together for a last decisive contest with France.”¹⁵ While Hitler was firmly committed to an offensive war even prior to coming to power in 1933, the German military did not start to conduct offensive war planning until the mid- to late-1930s—very close to actual offensive operations.

The German military formulated a defensive/offensive plan in 1935 for the contingency of a war with Czechoslovakia, France, and Russia known as *Stellung*, which they continued to modify until 1937 when it became Plan Red. But the first truly offensive war plan was one which guided the reoccupation of the Rhineland in 1936. The plan for the occupation of Czechoslovakia (Green) was not finalized until September 1938 in the midst of the Czech crisis. The plan to attack Poland (White) was formulated in April 1939, only months before the strike was launched.

The Germans developed Norwegian/Danish (*Studie Nord*) plans in winter of 1939–40 on the eve of their Nordic campaign in March 1940. Finally, the plans for attacking France and the Low Countries (Yellow) were only developed in October 1939, after war had been declared and only eight months before active operations began.

The situation was similar with the British and French. Remarkably, the Allies declared war on Germany after it attacked Poland in September 1939 without any offensive plans whatsoever. This is especially ironic in the French case because earlier in the interwar period Paris had a series of plans for offensive operations against Berlin. In 1920, for example, planners drafted Plan P to enable France to enforce the Versailles Treaty by threatening to occupy industrial centers in western Germany. In 1923, Plan A envisioned a full-scale offensive to prevent Germany from defeating Poland. But the military began a shift to defensive plans. In 1929, Plan B envisioned defensive actions in the Rhineland to allow the French and Belgians to establish defensive positions on their borders. Plan C in 1931 was based on a territorial defense anchored on the Maginot Line but with provisions for assisting Luxembourg and Belgium. With Plan D in 1933, the

Dispositions of Forces Under Original and Revised French and German Plans

German Forces	Original Schlieffen Plan (1905–1906)	Moltke Schlieffen Plan (1914)	Allied Forces	Plan XVII (A)	Plan XVII (B)
1 st Army		<i>260,000</i>	British Expeditionary Force	<i>125,000</i>	<i>125,000</i>
2 ^d Army		<i>260,000</i>	5 th Army	<i>240,000</i>	<i>240,000</i>
3 ^d Army		<i>120,000</i>	4 th Army	<i>160,000</i>	<i>160,000</i>
4 th Army	<i>1,320,000</i>	<i>200,000</i>	3 ^d Army	<i>200,000</i>	<i>200,000</i>
5 th Army		<i>200,000</i>	2 ^d Army	<i>180,000</i>	<i>180,000</i>
6 th Army		<i>200,000</i>	1 st Army	<i>280,000</i>	<i>280,000</i>
7 th Army	<i>120,000</i>	<i>120,000</i>			
German right/French left	<i>1,320,000</i>	<i>1,040,000</i>		<i>125,000</i>	<i>725,000</i>
German left/French right	<i>120,000</i>	<i>320,000</i>		<i>1,060,000</i>	<i>460,000</i>

[Note: Figures shown in italics refer to German right wing/French left wing deployed forces.]

Sources: Robert Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York: Quill, 1991), and Barbara Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 10–11.

focus of planning continued to be defensively oriented, relying more heavily on the Maginot Line. The French War Plan E in 1939 did envision moving troops into Belgium to protect a line on the Escaut/Scheldt River, so was basically defensive. The alternative Plan D (Dyle River) moved French defensive positions deep inside Belgium but did not diverge from the course of earlier schemes. The Breda Variant to Plan D in 1940, which moved Seventh Army into southern Holland to link up with Dutch forces, still did not contain provisions for attacking Germany. French designs changed dramatically over a short period and Paris declared war with no offensive plans.

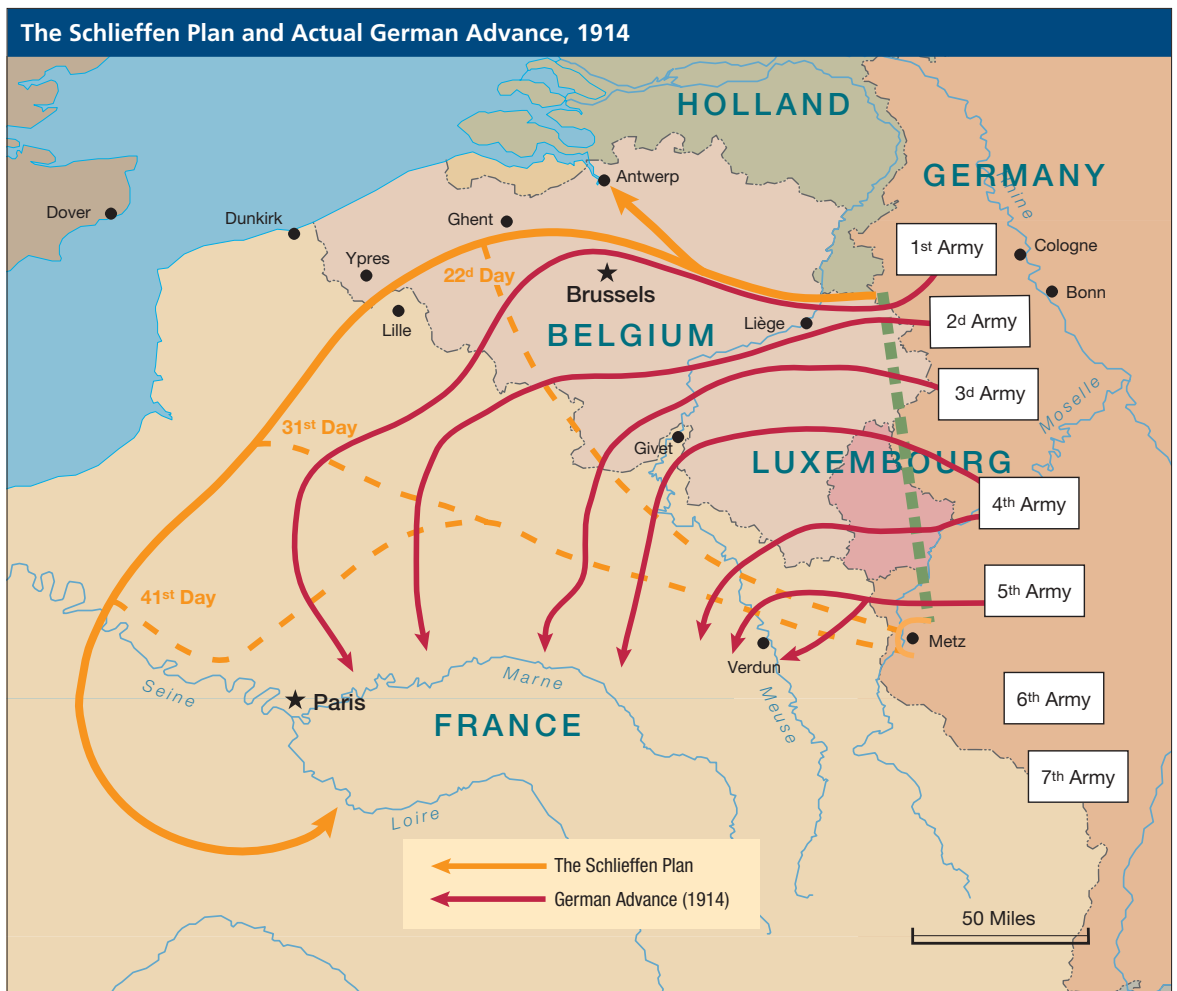
Neither of these cases conform to the logic of the Guns of August school. World War I was not a case in which defensively-oriented civilian leaders were forced into war by the offensive war plans of their militaries. Conversely, lack of offensive war plans did not hinder Hitler from going to war with the Allies. Nor did they stop the Allies from declaring war on the Axis after Germany invaded Poland. In short, war plans do not cause or prevent war.

Changing Ratios

But if war plans do not cause war, might they nevertheless affect military operations once war is declared? These cases suggest they can, but only to a degree. Many believe, for instance, that had certain critical changes not been made in the original (1905–06) Schlieffen Plan, the initial battles on the Western Front might have turned out differently. Schlieffen’s successor as the Chief of the General Staff, Moltke, made three key alterations before August 1914. First, he changed the ratio of forces between the right and left wings. Schlieffen’s dying words were reputedly “It must

come to a fight. Only make the right wing strong.”¹⁶ In his original formulation, the balance of forces between the attacking German right wing and the defending entente left wing was about 13:1. Modifications made by Moltke as well as switches in French Plan XVII reduced that ratio to 1.43:1. A rule of thumb is that an attacking army needs a 3:1 advantage to achieve a breakthrough. These changes altered the attacker/defender ratios dramatically (see table). Second, Moltke sent two corps (180,000 men) from the important First Army to the east to help stem the Russian offensive into Prussia. Finally, he decided not to violate Dutch neutrality, forcing all the attacking German forces to transit through the bottleneck at Liège. Many historians agree with the observation made by L.C.F. Turner that if the Schlieffen Plan had been executed in its original form, it would have achieved “overwhelming initial success.”¹⁷

The changes the French made in Plan XVII were even more important. The original plan would have pitted most front-line forces against the German defensive left wing, thus leaving the attacking right wing with either a 13:1 force ratio—the original Schlieffen Plan versus Plan XVII (A)—or a 10:1 force ratio—the Moltke Schlieffen Plan versus Plan XVII (A). Either would have achieved sufficient levels to make a German breakthrough likely. Conversely, Plan XVII (B) shifted a number of front-line forces north of the pivotal city of Metz (the hinge between the German right and left wings), dramatically changing force ratios on the German right and French left wings. Against the original Schlieffen Plan, it made the ratio 1.82:1; for a revised Schlieffen



Source: Robert Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I* (New York: Quill, 1991), p. 24.

Plan it lowered the ratio to 1.43:1. In either case it became impossible for Germany to achieve a 3:1 ratio and ensured that their assault would fail.

Changing plans also played an important role in deciding the Battle of France in May 1940. Many attribute the German victory to

changing plans also played an important role in deciding the Battle of France in May 1940

overwhelming numerical or technological superiority. But it has become clear that Germany enjoyed neither, except perhaps in the air. As Ernest May noted,

“The essential thread in the story of Germany’s victory over France hangs on the imaginativeness of German war planning and the corresponding lack of imaginativeness on the Allied side.”¹⁸

Germany did not have a war winning plan from the beginning. As pointed out above, the original offensive plan against France (Yellow) was not formulated until October 1939, well after declaring war. Plan Yellow has sometimes been

characterized even by Germans as a replay of the Schlieffen Plan. That is not quite accurate, for the latter plan at least aspired to deliver a decisive blow by seizing Paris. Plan Yellow, far less ambitious, sought merely a tactical victory in Belgium. German forces in the west were organized in two army groups from north to south: Group B facing Belgium and Group A facing Luxembourg and northeastern France. Group B, with a total of 30 infantry and 8 armored divisions, was the main attacking force under Plan Yellow. Its aim was to fight through Belgian, French, and British forces and seize the Channel ports. Group A, with 22 infantry divisions, was expected to launch only limited supporting attacks further south on the Belgians and French to tie them down along the Meuse and Sambre. The Germans would have failed under the original plan. As Len Deighton has noted, “had the attack been made according

to the earliest Plan Yellow, it would almost certainly have come to stalemate in the mud.”¹⁹

In contrast, the final German plan of February 1940 was a war-winner. Various referred to as Plan Yellow [5], the Manstein Plan, or *Sichelschnitt*, it had a much more ambitious goal: to cut off and decisively defeat Dutch, Belgian, French, and British forces by targeting a weak section of the French front, breaking through it, and isolating the bulk of Allied forces in the low countries and northern France. Unlike Plan Yellow, *Sichelschnitt* placed the main burden of the attack on Army Group A, with 35 infantry and 10 armored or motorized divisions. Group B was relegated to a supporting role; with its 26 infantry and 3 armored divisions it was only expected to subdue Holland and tie down French and Belgian forces in northeastern Belgium and southern Holland. Spear-headed by XIX Panzer Corps under General Heinz Guderian, Group A was expected to thread its way through the Ardennes Forest, establish bridgeheads across the Meuse River, drive through the French Ninth and Second armies, and race toward the



General Giraud as prisoner.

French Channel coast, cutting off the bulk of the Allied forces in Belgium and northern France. The Germans targeted Ninth and Second Armies because they knew that unlike French forces manning defensive positions in Belgium, these units consisted largely of reserve or second-rate troops. The attack at these points achieved 5:1 superiority and a breakthrough came quickly. The key advantage was that the Manstein Plan exploited the weakest part of the French front and landed a knock-out punch.

Key to Defeat

Fate as much as strategy led the Germans to adopt the Manstein Plan instead of the original Plan Yellow. From the outset of the war Hitler was dissatisfied with the latter, which was provided by the High Command. But he was also skeptical when General Erich von Manstein (chief of staff to General Gerd von Rundstedt, Army Group A commander) proposed redirecting the main axis of attack through the Ardennes. Three events changed his mind. First, in January 1940 a German aircraft got lost and crashed in Mechlen, Belgium, with parts of Plan Yellow on board, which then fell into Allied hands. Second, German intelligence ascertained that the new French Plan D/Breda Variant placed most Allied forces in Belgium right in the path of the Army Group B main

axis of attack under Plan Yellow. Finally, sandtable exercises conducted in February 1940 demonstrated that *Sichelschnitt* was feasible. As Manstein concluded:

*The utter debacle suffered by the enemy in northern Belgium was almost certainly due to the fact that, as a result of the changes later made to the operational plan, the tank units of Army Group A were able to cut straight through his lines of communication and push him away from the Somme.*²⁰

The decisive victory in the Battle of France would not have happened without this change in plans.

Accounting for the collapse of France in the spring of 1940 has become a cottage industry. Many scholars, following Marc Bloch, attribute this strange defeat to domestic political conflict in the 1930s. While France did indeed suffer from internal disorder, how that caused its military reversal is unclear. Some suggest that poor morale hindered operational performance. But this was not the experience of the enemy. As one German historian has observed, “It must be stressed that Allied troops fought magnificently, and worthily upheld the traditions that had so impressed the Germans in the First World War.”²¹ Others maintain that the one-year term of service imposed by civilian leaders undermined combat effectiveness. But Deighton concluded, “there were many first-rate French divisions with high morale and first-class equipment. The low standard of the reservists was more indicative of the extent of France’s mobilization—one man in eight—than of the state of its regular army formations.”²²

Many analysts have faulted the lack of an appropriate armored doctrine. Although that was a problem, it is unclear that doctrine alone was critical. As one analyst remarked, inappropriate doctrine was less a factor than the maldistribution of forces:

*The French defeat was owing not so much to a faulty conception of mechanized war but to a flagrant disregard by the high command of its own instructions. . . . Far from waiting to determine the main axis of the German advance [General Maurice] Gamelin dislocated his strategic reserves by committing the French Seventh Army to the Breda Variant.*²³

The positioning of forces was ultimately a function of war plans; thus the change in plans was seemingly the key to the defeat. Recall that under Plan E, the French would have concentrated on defending the northern border with only a small advance by 16th Corps into Belgium to take up positions on the Escaut/Scheldt River. Moreover, the plan kept Seventh Army, comprised of one mechanized, two motorized, and four infantry divisions, in reserve near Riems. German historians



Big Three at Yalta meeting, 1945.

have noted that “if the enemy remained in his positions on the Franco-Belgium northeast frontier then the proposed offensive wedge would drive straight into his deployment.”²⁴ Had the French stuck with Plan E, they likely would have stymied an attack based on Plan Yellow.

On the other hand, the shift to Plan D/Breda Variant on March 20, 1940, played a key role in the defeat. Unlike Plan E, it advanced French forces far enough into Belgium not only to defend the Channel ports but also to protect population centers, including Brussels. By standing on the Dyle River rather than the Escaut/Scheldt, the French expected to shorten their front by 40 miles. The Breda Variant to Plan D was even more ambitious: it sent Seventh Army farther north to Breda in the Netherlands to establish contact

with the Dutch, who were expected to retreat into a fortified area behind the Peel Marshes. Although Plan D shortened Allied lines, Plan D/Breda Variant extended them. More importantly, by moving Seventh Army to southern Holland, both of the plans moved one of the most effective units out of a position where it threatened the southern flank of the main axis of attack for Army Group A under the Manstein Plan.

Without any first-rate forces behind Ninth and Second Armies, once they were overcome the battle was over for all Allied forces further north. As Deighton reminds us, “A modern army attacked from the rear is as good as defeated. It simply seizes up into a traffic jam of monumental confusion. Thus the greatest ambition of a strategist is to attack an enemy’s rear and then sever the enemy from his supplies. The Manstein plan had achieved both these ambitions.”

Plan D/Breda Variant positioned only reserves and other second-rate forces opposite the Ardennes because the French high command thought it would have 8–9 days warning of an attack through the forest. This was a grave miscalculation, but much of the German army high command before February 1940 and even such astute military commentators as Liddell Hart made the same mistake. In short, the key failing in May 1940 was embracing precisely the wrong war plan in the face of imminent attack. Plan E would have foiled Plan Yellow and put a dent in *Sichelschnitt*. On the other hand, Plan D/Breda Variant played into German hands.

Clearly war plans do not cause wars; political decisions made by civilians do. Conversely, war plans can affect wartime outcomes but only under certain conditions. Those plans that affected battlefield outcomes for good or ill in both world wars tended to be formulated close to the actual combat, on lower levels by soldiers who would execute them. The plans envisioned campaigns that would be decided quickly and involved enemies relatively matched in strength and technology. War plans should concern policymakers not so much because they can cause or prevent wars, but because they affect the course of a conflict once begun.

Further research is necessary into how variations in plans affect wartime operations. Plans differ in terms of when they are formulated and how far into a conflict they try to guide operations, and also their level of detail, purpose, and flexibility. For example, American planners distinguish between wartime/crisis (crisis action) versus peacetime (deliberate) planning. They also delineate between campaign (initial stages) and contingency or outline plans (subsequent stages). Moreover, there are more general (concept) and more specific (operational) war plans. In addition, plans are formulated on relatively high levels such as the National Security Council or Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as on lower levels such as unified or theater commands. They can be made for a variety of purposes including mobilization, deployment, employment, and sustainment. Finally, they can be rigid (one option) or flexible (multiple options). Understanding consequences of these variations is essential in ensuring that more effective war plans are formulated. **JFQ**

war plans do not cause wars; political decisions made by civilians do

NOTES

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¹⁸ Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), p. 460.

¹⁹ Len Deighton, *Blitzkrieg: From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Dunkirk* (New York: HarperCollins, 1979), p. 97.

²⁰ Eric von Manstein, *Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1994), p. 102.

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²² Deighton, *Blitzkrieg*, p. 135.

²³ Don W. Alexander, "Repercussions of the Breda Variant," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Spring 1974), p. 477.

²⁴ Jacobsen, *Contingency Plans*, p. 35.