

## 1914: OOPS! THE PLANS FAIL

We still tend to think that the war was all of one piece and that those who experienced it had a single, common experience. The war, however, developed what the historian Trevor Wilson, quoting the novelist Frederick Manning, calls its 'myriad faces' (Wilson, 1986). The soldier of 1914 encountered something different from the soldier of 1917; the French soldier something different from the German; the front soldier something different from the people at home, who often seemed to the soldiers to share nothing with them any more [*Docs. 6, 12 and 16*]; the mother worrying at home something different from the nurse at a base hospital [*Doc. 17*]; the war profiteer something different from the conscientious objector in jail. As the fighting tended to subside over winter, giving those in charge a chance to reconsider their approach, the war also changed over time. Each year it lasted formed a distinct period:

1. 1914. Manoeuvre on the battlefields, bogging down in the west into unexpected positional war while the war in the east remained more open and mobile; at home, 'business as usual'.
2. 1915. Improvised trench war and badly planned offensive disasters on the Western Front; German success against Russia; the state-controlled war economy emerged at home.
3. 1916. The year of the most-remembered phase: well-planned disasters of attrition on land and sea; total war at home.
4. 1917. No end in sight in the field, until Russia collapsed; revolution, despair or grim determination at home.
5. 1918. Movement returned to the battlefield; the home fronts approached or moved past the tipping point. And then it was over.

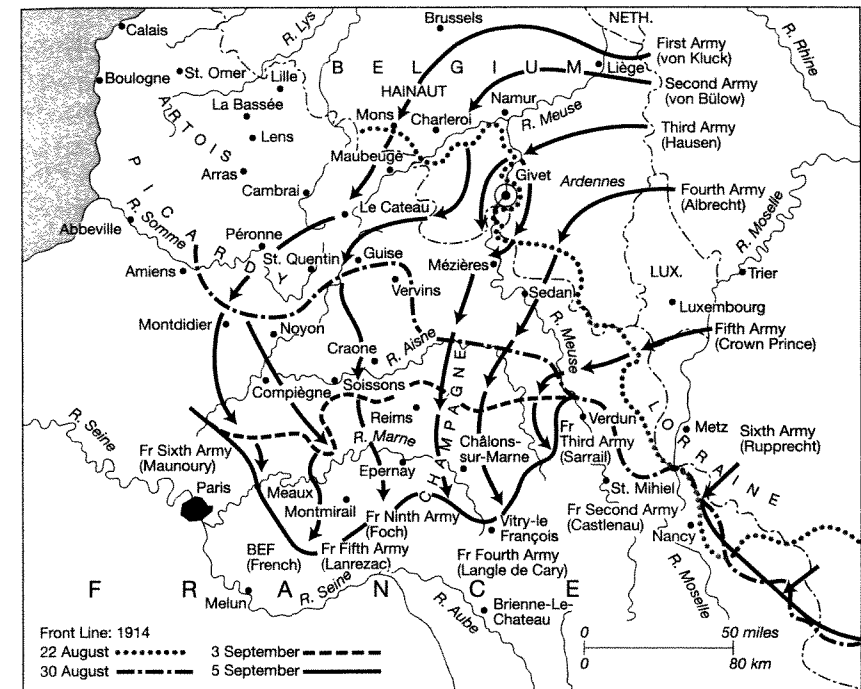
## THE BATTLES OF THE FRONTIERS

In compliance with the Schlieffen–Moltke plan, the Germans sent 1.5 million men across their western frontier in the first days of the war. First came cavalry patrols and an advance guard into Luxembourg on 3 August. Then

the northern-most armies set off into Belgium on 4 August, the First Army under General Alexander von Kluck and the Second under General Karl von Bülow. With 320,000 men, Kluck's First Army was the largest of the seven German armies attacking in the west. With the advantage of surprise, the Germans were slowed only by problems with traffic and supply. The first real resistance the First Army met came at the fortress of Liège, the hub of the Belgian defensive system. When the Belgian defenders stopped the initial German attacks, the Germans brought up immense siege mortars. The main fortress at Liège fell quickly, and then the satellite fortresses. By 16 August, the Germans had opened the path through the central plain of Belgium towards France. Although Liège was still the only significant obstacle that the Germans had faced, the vanguard of their attack slowed down simply because men could not keep marching between 20 and 25 miles a day, especially in the unusually hot weather. Moreover, by blowing railway tunnels, the Belgians constricted the flow of supplies and reinforcements. When Belgian civilians resisted, the Germans treated them as *franc tireurs* or terrorists and killed them en masse to cow the rest into submission. In Dinant, 612 men, women and children were shot in the main square. Two days later, the great library at Louvain was set on fire when the occupying troops panicked for five days. The British later exaggerated the 'Belgian atrocities' of August and September 1914 for propaganda purposes, so that posterity came to think they were a hoax. They were not. They happened, and they set a terrible precedent for the century to follow.

Moltke thought briefly about shifting the main attack to Lorraine. He moved some reserve divisions there and gave the Sixth Army, under Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, orders to defend vigorously. Rupprecht was more than just a figurehead and had real abilities as a commander. He decided that the order to defend did not rule out attacking. By 20 August, his Bavarians had thrown the French out of Lorraine. So by accident, the bulk of the French army was retreating to positions between Paris and the greatest of the French frontier fortresses, Verdun.

By now Joffre knew that the Germans were advancing in strength in Belgium and that the centre of the German line was also surprisingly strong. Because of the prior underestimation of German strength, he naturally concluded that this strength in the north and middle meant that the Germans were weak somewhere else. At first, he thought this meant in Lorraine. When his attack into Lorraine failed, he decided that the centre of the German line must be weaker than it first seemed. That was where he sent the Third and Fourth Armies. With the French infantry resplendent in bright red trousers and blue jackets and the officers in full dress uniform, like targets on a shooting range, the result was a massacre. The French fell back to the river Meuse. Their initial attacks had failed badly at the cost of 300,000 casualties and had scarcely bothered the Germans. They were just beginning to roll.



Map 1 German invasion of Belgium and France 1914: up to the Marne  
Adapted from Richard Natkiel, *Atlas of Twentieth-Century Warfare*, Bison Books (London, 1982, reprinted 1989), p. 30

#### THE BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE (BEF) UP TO MONS

On 5 August, three days after France began mobilization and a day after the British Empire declared war on Germany, Prime Minister Asquith convened a Council of War. The Council realized immediately that the BEF must go to north-west Europe. As for what it would do when it arrived, the soldiers admitted that the only plan they had was to stick to the left flank of the French army. Britain thus backed into the Western Front as a very junior partner of France, adding the four (later six) divisions of the BEF to the 70 of the French army.

The BEF duly embarked, crossing the Channel and setting out for Maubeuge without a hitch. By the time it approached Mons across the border in Belgium on 21 August, the French were beginning to realize that they faced disaster. Almost all of Joffre's armies had been decimated and thrown back. Only the Fifth Army under General Charles Lanrezac, on the left of the French line, remained intact, simply because the German First Army had yet to reach

it. Lanrezac, along with General Ferdinand Foch, had taught the supremacy of the offensive at the Supreme War College before the war. After the war, critics contended that the two men offered a one-sided gospel that stressed high morale and aggression and overlooked the basic realities of defensive firepower. A closer look at their arguments reveals a more reasonable concern for ensuring that attacks over open ground should succeed despite the power of the defence, primarily by employing what would now be called 'fire and movement' tactics by small groups of infantry. Certainly at this juncture Lanrezac was not about to leap into the attack. He was alarmed by reports that the German Army was strong not only in front of him but also on both his flanks. Rather than advance only to be surrounded, he preferred to wait. Nevertheless, his reports to Joffre used aggressive rhetoric, convincing Joffre that he was keen to attack.

The Commander of the BEF, Sir John French, was a cavalryman with a distinguished record. As with virtually every other commander of the early war, except Joffre, he was racked by anxiety and indecision, as if he knew he was out of his depth in an unexpected situation. When he visited Joffre on 16 August, Joffre spoke glowingly of Lanrezac's zeal to attack. Sir John discovered a different picture when he visited Lanrezac the next day. Belgian refugees were pouring through Lanrezac's sector to escape Kluck's steamroller and the next French army down the line was suspiciously quiet, leading Lanrezac to think it might be on the verge of pulling out.

Before the BEF could attack in support of the French, it collided with Kluck's First Army at Mons on 23 August; 200,000 Germans by now against 75,000 British. Mons was one of the first battles in history to take part in an industrial city, and the first in which aircraft\* played a part, the Germans using them to range their guns. The professionals of the BEF quickly dug in among the slag heaps, while the Germans, impatient to brush aside this pesky obstacle to their advance, attacked frontally with little artillery support. The British riflemen, trained to fire an aimed shot every four seconds, held off the Germans for a full day. By the end of 23 August, Sir John learned that Lanrezac's Fifth Army not only had failed to join the attack but was even starting to retreat, without a word to the embattled British. They had no choice but to break off the battle and join the French in retreating to the south. They covered over two hundred miles in the next two weeks, the infantry marching in the late-summer heat for twenty out of every twenty-four hours.

#### THE END OF THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

On the other side of the hill, the German General Staff was moving step by step away from its original intentions, confirming the observation of Moltke's uncle that no battle plan survives intact after first contact with the enemy. Not only was Kluck peeling off large detachments to surround those pockets of the

Belgian army still intact, but Moltke was strengthening the left wing in Lorraine. On 25 August, he detached two corps from the right wing to relieve the crisis that seemed to be impending in the east. If he is to be faulted, it would be for taking these men from the all-important right wing, which had already started to bog down in Belgium. The fewer men the First and Second Armies had, the more they tended to pull apart as they fanned out when they moved into France. On 27 August, Moltke allowed Kluck to freewheel, moving independently of the Second Army next to him. Convinced that the British were retreating west to the Channel, Kluck wanted to sweep wide to the north to cut them off. The BEF, however, was retreating to the south, not west to the coast, and was closer to Kluck than he realized. The British 2nd Corps, under General Horace Smith-Dorrien, was too exhausted to march any further and dug in at Le Cateau. Once again, Kluck had the BEF in his sights, once again British rifle fire and artillery were deadly, and once again the Germans made the mistake of attacking frontally. The 2nd Corps stood its ground and finally retired in good order.

Thinking only of the hunt for the BEF, Kluck lost touch with Bülow's Second Army. The British marched into the gap between the two armies. They might have made something of their luck under a decent commander. By 29 August, however, Sir John French had lapsed into a total funk. His subordinate corps commanders, Generals Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien, were still full of fight, but that only depressed Sir John the more and he actually issued orders to prepare the BEF to retire to England to refit. Sensing that Sir John was losing his grip, the British Cabinet sent the new Secretary of State for War, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, over to instruct him to conform to the movements of the French army and not even to think of bugging out.

Joffre also hovered over Lanrezac's shoulder, and when Bülow's Second Army once again ran into the French Fifth Army, Lanrezac finally hit back. So came about the muddled battles of St. Quentin and Guise, the high point of which came when Lanrezac's 1st Corps, under General Franchet d'Esperey, threw the Germans back over the river Oise in the last old-style Napoleonic infantry charge in history. Kluck now had to double back to help Bülow, which meant turning south short of Paris instead of hooking around it to the west. Moltke eventually approved, because his hope now was to push the French to the south-east. To make sure the large garrison in Paris or the BEF did not attack Bülow's rear, Moltke ordered Kluck to stay between Bülow and Paris. Kluck thought this was too cautious, and on 2 September he ordered his First Army to cross the river Marne the following day.

#### THE MARNE

With Kluck only thirty miles from Paris, the French government prudently shifted to Bordeaux. On 3 September, the Military Governor of Paris, General

Joseph Gallieni, summoned from retirement to be Joffre's deputy, realized from air reconnaissance that the Germans were turning south short of Paris and heading for the Marne. He ordered the new Sixth Army under General Michel-Joseph Maunoury to prepare to attack the ripe German flank that had appeared when Kluck moved to the Marne. Joffre confirmed the attack the following day, and then went to work on Sir John French. After some spirited oratory from Joffre, Sir John promised that the BEF would do what it could.

On the German side, poor communications were wrecking the tidy world of peacetime plans, war games and staff rides. It was also messing up Moltke's willpower. Only a week before, the mood in his headquarters in Luxembourg had been euphoric, but by 5 September, victory was slipping away. The enemy was getting beaten like a drum, but it was still free to manoeuvre, a bad omen which Moltke deduced from the absence of captured men and guns. Worse still, Kluck's energetic tourism had exposed the entire German right wing to a Schlieffen plan in reverse. On 4 September, Moltke restrained the First and Second Armies and warned them to guard against a flank attack from Paris. By the time the order reached Kluck, he had already moved most of his army across the Marne.

On 4 September, Maunoury's Sixth Army ran into the reserve corps Kluck had left north of the Marne. Maunoury's sharp attack on the vulnerable German right flank had a ripple effect, leading to adjustments out of all proportion to the initial French blow. Moltke ordered Kluck to pull back. By 6 September, the entire French army and the BEF were attacking. Nowhere did they break the German line, and the net effect was little more than equal and opposite pressure. When Kluck pulled his two corps back across the Marne and sent them to counter-attack Maunoury, this opened another gap of almost twenty miles between the two German armies. By now, the rule was that when there was a gap, the BEF would pop up in the middle of it. The rest of the rule was that the British were unable to exploit their good fortune. Aside from the gap between their leading armies, the Germans were doing well. They repulsed the French Fifth Army, now under Franchet d'Esperey instead of Lanrezac. They drove back the French Ninth Army under General Ferdinand Foch, of whom more will be heard later.

In spite of the German steadiness in the field, they blinked first. On 9 September, Bülow ordered his army to pull back. Kluck had no choice but to conform and ordered a retreat in the direction of Soissons to the north-east. By 11 September, all the German armies were heading north, either under local orders or on direct orders from Moltke. The only reason the German retreat did not turn into a rout was that the French and British were too exhausted to pursue.

Thus dwindled out the Battle of the Marne, the 'miracle' as the French immediately called it. It did not mark the collapse of the Schlieffen-Moltke plan, because Moltke's indecision and Kluck's improvising had already forfeited

a quick German victory before Maunoury jarred the German right flank. It was not a showcase for clever generalship. Joffre's main virtue was his equanimity, a quality not to be dismissed lightly in a supreme commander. What the British would call 'twitch' in the Second World War can spread like an airborne disease, especially from high office. Joffre's supporters tried to credit him with the attack on the German flank, but the initiative for that came from Gallieni. As it happens, the Germans stopped it cold, despite the presence of 3,000 soldiers rushed into the French line by 600 taxi cabs. What was significant during the battle was not what happened but what the Germans, and above all Moltke, thought might happen. Nor were their fears groundless, because if the BEF had been able to exploit the gap between the two main German armies, if Joffre had ordered a massive attack by his left wing in the east instead of a general attack along the line, the German army might indeed have been broken and a long way from home.

#### FIRST YPRES

Although the Battle of the Marne was a draw, it was also a strategic victory for the Allies. The German expectation of a short war was finished. As both sides regrouped and recovered, the leaders looked ahead to the next round. They realized that frontal attacks were best avoided. Outflanking the enemy to the north would be wiser. In pulling back to the Aisne, where the German First Army dug the first trenches of the war and held off a French attack, Kluck began what was to be called 'The Race to the Sea'. The description is misleading, because each side was trying to turn the other's flank before reaching the sea.

After the Marne, Joffre bowed to Sir John French's plea that the BEF be allowed to fight nearer to its Channel base. It was extracted from the Aisne and sent up to Flanders. By early October, the Germans had finally taken Antwerp. With this threat in the rear removed, they decided to use five of the reserve corps that had besieged and taken Antwerp to break around the north of the enemy line at Ypres. By then, the chief of staff and head of the OHL\* (High Command) was no longer Moltke, who had suffered one nervous collapse too many, but Erich von Falkenhayn, the Minister of War. Falkenhayn seemed more politician than soldier to some of his fellow generals, and to posterity his short-cropped hair, silver moustache and cold-blooded command decisions made him seem like an earlier version of Darth Vader. Looking past appearances and the jealousy of rivals, Falkenhayn analyzed situations with a clear intelligence [*Doc. 2*]. To help the flanking attack he used replacement divisions made up of untrained student volunteers. By the end of the battle, between a third and a half of them, around 40,000, were killed or wounded. Among the minority to emerge unscathed was an older member of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Regiment, Adolf Hitler. The BEF by then included

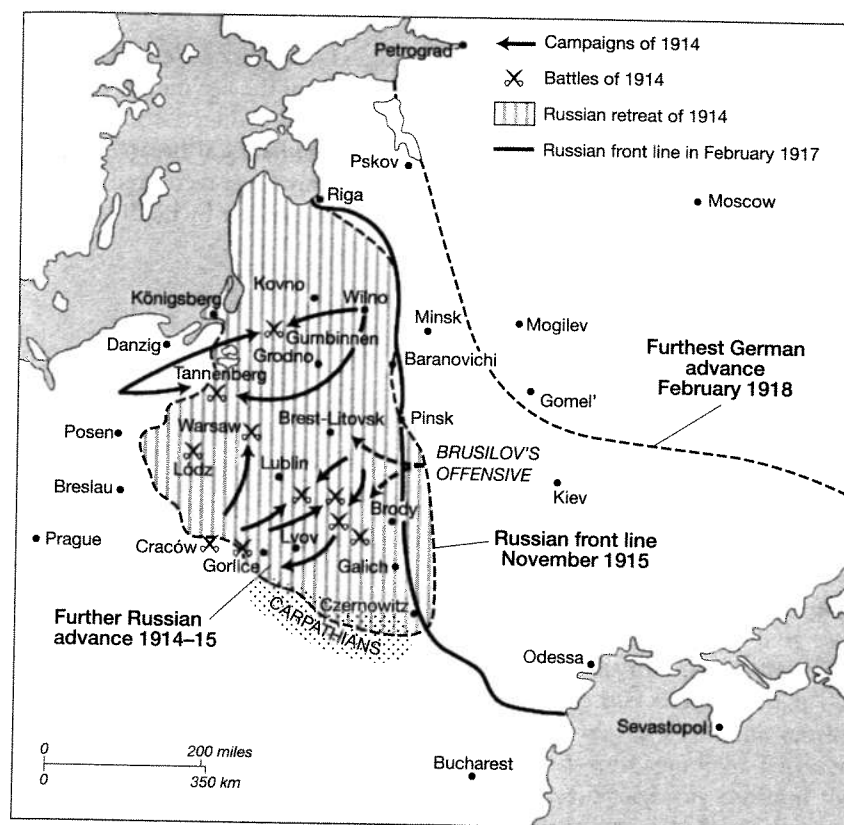
units of the Indian army. By the end of the battle, a third of the original BEF was dead.

Both the Germans and the British actually broke through, but in each case the defending side brought up reserves to seal the breach quicker than the attacking side exploited its gains. The climax of the battle, actually witnessed by the Kaiser, came when the Germans broke through at Gheluvelt, and the British, led by a few hundred survivors of the 2nd Worcestershires who formed the only reserve left, counter-attacked and threw the Germans back. After a final attack by the elite Prussian Guards failed, the battle petered out. By holding Ypres itself but giving ground slightly to the north, the British gained a bulge or salient in the Front, which now ran from the Channel to the Alps. They lost 50,000 dead and wounded at Ypres, the Germans around 100,000.

#### EASTERN FRONT: TANNENBERG TO LEMBERG

On the Eastern Front, plans and expectations also fell by the wayside. The Russians had not obliged the Germans by waiting six weeks to attack. Instead, they threw two huge armies into East Prussia as soon as the war started in August. The First Army, led by General Pavel Rennenkampf, advanced from the east towards Königsberg. General Alexander Samsonov's Second Army came up from the south. These armies were little better than feudal levies, badly equipped and worse led, but they rolled over the German screen by sheer weight of numbers. When the German commander in the east, General Max von Prittwitz, appealed for reinforcements, Moltke, as mentioned, detached two corps from the west and sent them to hold back the Russians. By the time they arrived, the new commanders in the east, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, had turned the tide with the forces on hand, following a plan that Col. Max Hoffmann, operations officer with the German Eighth Army, had prepared earlier.

Hoffmann realized that Samsonov's Second Army, moving slowly towards the town of Tannenberg, was out of touch with Rennenkampf's First Army. Legend has it that the two Russian generals hated each other, but their failure to co-operate was common enough among Russian officers. Even worse than any personal feuding, the Russians did not encode their radio communications, which allowed the Germans full access to their plans. Hindenburg had been plucked from retirement to steady the new command team. Ludendorff provided the brains. As a talented staff officer of bourgeois origins, he had worked tirelessly before the war on the expansion of the German Army. Despite his high rank as Quarter-Master General of the Second Army, he personally led the capture of Liège, and then moved to the east. He was known to be erratic and tempestuous, which is why he was paired with Hindenburg. They became a remarkable team.



Map 2 Eastern Front

Adapted from Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, Viking (New York), p. xviii

On 26 August, the outnumbered Germans attacked Samsonov's Second Army near Tannenberg. Three days later the Second Army had ceased to exist, with 120,000 Russians taken prisoner and most of the rest of the original 200,000 dead. Samsonov shot himself. Ludendorff quickly moved the Eighth Army to face Rennenkampf's First Army in the wastelands formed by the Masurian Lakes. The Germans mounted a holding attack,\* pinning the Russians while a flanking force worked north through a gap in the Russian lines. By 11 September, the First Army had lost 125,000 men; Rennenkampf abandoned the field and headed back to Russia.

On the same day, 11 September, the Austro-Hungarian offensive in Galicia, which had begun successfully in August with the capture of Krasnik and Komarow in Russian Poland, fell apart when the Russian Eighth Army, led by the ablest Russian commander in the war, General Aleksei Brusilov,

smashed into the right flank of the Austro–Hungarian advance. The Austrian Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hötzendorf, originally intended to operate only against Serbia. When Moltke virtually ordered him at the last minute to move against Russia, he tried to mount two attacks in opposite directions. When the Russians took Lemberg, the Austro–Hungarian withdrawal became a rout. With 350,000 men lost, the Austro–Hungarian Army never recovered from its opening fiasco. The Serbs then completed Conrad’s misery by holding off his invasion of Serbia in September.