MOLTKE FAMILY WAR PLANNING AND THE MARNE CAMPAIGN

Maps for the planning of the elder Moltke can be found in

T. Zuber, *The Moltke Myth. Prussian War Planning 1857-1871*,

for the planning of Schlieffen, the younger Moltke and the Marne Campaign in

*Inventing the Schlieffen Plan. German War Planning 1871-1914* and

*The Real German War Plan 1904-1914*

According to the “Schlieffen Plan” dogma, as presented by Holger Herwig and many others, Moltke “quickly adopted Schlieffen's blueprint” and “the basic similarities [between Schlieffen's and Moltke's planning] were glaring”.[[1]](#endnote-1) However “The basic differences are also important”: Moltke “modified” the Schlieffen Plan. Herwig quotes Anika Mombauer: “Germany went to war on 4 August with a 'modified Schlieffen plan with similar goals'”.

The supposed “modifications” Moltke made to the “Schlieffen plan” were in fact so fundamental that it is clear that Moltke was operating on the basis of a strategic template that had nothing to do with the “Schlieffen plan”.

Herwig says that the “Schlieffen Plan” was for a two-front war. It assumed that the Russians would take 40 days to mobilize and deploy, but by that time the Germans would have decisively beaten the French and could transfer forces east. At no point in his discussion of the plan did Herwig cite either the original archival documents or pages in Ritter's translation. Freed from the necessity of using actual evidence, Herwig relies on “common knowledge”.

The actual “Schlieffen Plan” *Denkschrift* was for a one-front war against France alone. The first page of the handwritten Schlieffen Plan *Denkschrift* says in the upper left-hand corner *Krieg gegen Frankreich* - “War against France”. The first line says that France cannot count on Russian support. Russia is not mentioned again.[[2]](#endnote-2) There is no reference to Russian mobilization or transfer of forces from France to Russia. In the 1913/14 war plan Moltke expressly stated that any war would be two-front, and that was the only war he planned for.[[3]](#endnote-3) Indeed, Moltke entered this observation on the 1911 typed edition of the “Schlieffen Plan” *Denkschrift* itself.[[4]](#endnote-4) The difference between a one-front war and a two-front war is fundamental.

Herwig acknowledges that Schlieffen did not have enough forces to execute the “Schlieffen Plan”.[[5]](#endnote-5) He thinks Schlieffen was short 8 corps – he was actually short 12 corps (24 divisions: one active, seven reserve, sixteen *Ersatz*). More to the point, Herwig acknowledges that Moltke did not have the force necessary to execute the plan either, but disingenuously does not say by how much.[[6]](#endnote-6) In fact, the “Schlieffen Plan” required 96 divisions, and at the beginning of the right-wing advance on 18 August Moltke had 74. In other words, Moltke was 22 divisions short of the “Schlieffen Plan” force structure. About a quarter of the forces necessary to the “Schlieffen Plan” didn't exist. The right-wing attack around Paris could not be executed without these units.

As will be shown below, Moltke made a series of other decisions in the planning and execution of the Marne Campaign that had nothing to do with the “Schlieffen Plan”, and show that he had some other strategic template in mind.

Moltke was obviously not following “Schlieffen Plan”, what was he doing? Where did Moltke's actual strategic template originate? Answering that question requires looking at Moltke's military biography.[[7]](#endnote-7)

1869. Passed officer candidate test, assigned to Fusilier Regiment 86.

1870 Transferred to Grenadier Regiment 7 in Liegnitz, which put him close to the elder Moltke's estate at Kreisau. Participated in the 1870/71 campaign in France

1872. Transferred to 1st Foot Guard Regiment

1875-78 General Staff Academy.

1878-1882 General Staff. 1881 Captain

1882. 2nd Adjutant to the elder Moltke

1889 1st Adjutant. Major

1891 Adjutant to Kaiser Wilhelm II

1893 Lieutenant-colonel. Commander of the Palace Guard Company.

1895. Colonel. Commander of the Kaiser Alexander Guard Grenadier Regiment 1.

1899 Brigadier General. Commander of the 1st Guard Brigade, Commandant of Potsdam.

1902 Major General. Commander of the 1st Guard Infantry Division. Senior Adjutant to the Kaiser.

16 February 1904 *Generalquartiermeister* (Executive Officer) of the General Staff

1 January 1906. Chief of the General Staff. The salient points of this rather unlikely career for a Chief of the German General Staff are:

For eleven years he was a personal adjutant, nine years as adjutant to his uncle, who was an octogenarian and only nominally Chief of the General Staff, the real work being done by Waldersee. This was followed by two years as adjutant to the Kaiser. Moltke was practically a uniformed civilian. At a critical point in the younger Moltke's career, when the elder Moltke could have insured he was sharpening his skills as an officer by assigning him to important General Staff *Abteilungen* (sections) in Berlin or as a division or corps Ia (operations officer) under influential commanders, the elder Moltke kept his nephew as his personal adjutant. If the younger Moltke learned anything in this period, it was from the elder Moltke.

Moltke then spent the next eleven years in the Prussian Guard. He commanded the Palace Guard Company. While 1st Guard Brigade commander he was also Commandant of Potsdam, and as 1st Guard Infantry Division commander he was once again adjutant to the Kaiser. The Guard units he commanded had heavy ceremonial responsibilities. Moltke was never a corps chief of staff or commanded a corps or army. Moltke was never a General Staff *Abteilungsleiter*, a section chief. The extent of his General Staff experience was two years as the Executive Officer on the General Staff. He barely had time to familiarize himself with how the General Staff worked, before becoming Chief of the General Staff.

In the German system, war planning at all levels was conducted by General Staff officers. But the younger Moltke had virtually no experience as a General Staff officer. The only war planner he had serious contact with was his uncle, the elder Moltke, with whom he was in daily contact for nine years; by comparison, he hardly knew Schlieffen, worked for him for only two years, and Moltke complained that the two didn't agree on anything. The question then becomes: what were the elder Moltke's war plans, and what influence did they have on the younger Moltke?[[8]](#endnote-8)

Analysing the elder Moltke's war planning would seem to be superfluous: *everyone* knows that Moltke was a far-seeing genius and brilliant planner who “marched separately to unite on the battlefield” in great *Kesselschlachten*, battles of encirclement. This is the theme of the most recent books on the subject, Geoffrey Wawro's *The Austro-Prussian War*[[9]](#endnote-9) and especially of the positively hagiographic books by Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning* and *Moltke and the German Wars*[[10]](#endnote-10). These books suffer from reliance on “common knowledge” and secondary sources, particularly Eberhard Kessel's patriotic and admiring *Moltke*[[11]](#endnote-11), and not on the seven massive volumes published by the German Great General Staff, which show Moltke's peacetime and wartime planning in original documents and great detail. When the elder Moltke's real planning is compared to that of his nephew, it is clear that the example the younger Moltke was following was that of his uncle, not Schlieffen.

Elder Moltke and Offensive Warfare

There was a fundamental difference in the war planning of Schlieffen and Moltke. Contrary to “common knowledge”, Schlieffen's strategic template was to conduct counterattacks against the expected co-ordinated Franco-Russian offensive. This is most evident in Schlieffen's massive November-December 1905 war game.[[12]](#endnote-12) But it is also crystal clear in earlier exercises, like the 1901 *Generalstabsreise Ost,* whenthe German defeated the French in the west and on the 23rd day of mobilizationtransferred nine corps to counterattack in East Prussia, and the 1903 *Generalstabsreise Ost,* when eleven corps were transferred to the east on the 27th day.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Moltke's plans, on the other hand, often involved an immediate offensive to exploit a fleeting window of opportunity. This is clear in Moltke's first real war plan in 1859.[[14]](#endnote-14) Normally the French massively outnumbered the Prussians, but the French main army entered Italy on 25 April 1859 to support Piedmont-Sardinia against Austria-Hungary. On 23 May Moltke said that there were only 100,000 troops left in metropolitan France, and the Prussians should use this opportunity to attack France with eight corps, 220,000 men (I Corps would be left in East Prussia against the Russians, who would not pose a real threat). Moltke'spoliticalobjective (and not necessarily that of the Prussian government) was to take Metz and Strasbourg, allowing Prussia to annex Alsace-Lorraine. Prussian command over the contingents of the German States would lead to political union under Prussian, not Austrian, leadership. Ultimately, the Prussians might have to force French recognition of Prussian supremacy in Alsace-Lorraine by advancing through Nancy on Paris. What Moltke would do if he actually got to Paris was not clear. Paris was the largest fortress in Europe, and well beyond the capacity of the Prussian Army to deal with. In the event, Prince Wilhelm did not decide to begin deployment until 4 July, with movement to commence on 15 July. On 11 July the French and Austrians signed the Peace of Villafranca, and to Moltke's bitter regret the opportunity to take Alsace-Lorraine from the French was lost.

The essential elements of all of Moltke's later planning are already evident. He advocated ruthless *Machtpolitik* to expand Prussian territory and political power. His military planning relied on numerical superiority and advancing on geographic objectives, but accepted loose ends flapping in the breeze, including an inability to define the final resolution of the operation.

The elder Moltke’s willingness in 1859 to ruthlessly exploit a very narrow window of opportunity fits the younger Moltke’s attitude in the years leading to the Great War. The Austro-Germans were losing the European arms race that began after the Balkan Wars and the Crises in Morocco, and the threat of the rapid Russian arms buildup, particularly the 1913/14 “Great Program”, led Moltke to believe that it was better to fight the Entente now rather than later.

Elder Moltke and Surprise Attack

In 1865/66, when tensions between Prussia and Austria over Schleswig-Holstein had begun to rise, Moltke wrote the draft of a war plan against Austria and the German Confederation. Potentially Prussia would be outnumbered, which was anathema for Moltke, whose lodestar was numerical superiority, and he came up with a novel means of evening the odds a bit. A problem in war with the Confederation was the vital Rhine bridgehead fortress at Mainz, which was a *Bundesfestung*, a Confederation fortress, with a mixed garrison from several members of the Confederation. A problem in the war with Austria was the corps-sized Saxon army, which was sure to fall back into Bohemia and reinforce the Austrian army. Moltke's solution to both problems was the *attaque brusquée,* a surprise attackusing “immobile” (unmobilized, peacetime strength) units which would, on the first day of mobilization, seize the Mainz fortress and invade Saxony so as to catch the Saxons before they could withdraw.[[15]](#endnote-15) To be effective, both operations had to be kept absolutely secret, which meant that the tactical leaders had no time to plan. It appears that Moltke personally wrote up orders in great detail and down to the lowest levels, for example: “The 3rd Light Infantry Battalion will march to Löbau in the night to the third day of mobilization and seize the rail station there”.

It is well-known that the younger Moltke personally planned the *attaque brusquée* on Liège: on the third day of mobilization five (later six) German brigades at peacetime strength would cross the Belgian-German border and attack the fortress on the night of the fourth-fifth days of mobilization, hoping to pass through the intervals between the permanent forts before they were “armed” (field fortifications dug to link up the permanent forts).[[16]](#endnote-16) Where did Moltke get this idea? It wasn't from Schlieffen, who never in his career contemplated such an operation. The answer is obviously that the younger Moltke was copying the Elder Moltke's *attaque brusquée* plan of 1865/66. The younger Moltke even repeated the elder Moltke's practise of giving detailed, unchangeable orders. It should come as no surprise that the attack on Liège was a fiasco, tactically, operationally and politically.

For political reasons, Bismarck brokered an agreement concerning Mainz, with Bavaria getting the fortress and the Prussian troops withdrawing, so there was no surprise attack on Mainz, and Bismarck did not give the Prussian army permission to enter Saxony until 15 June, nine days after the Prussians had completed deployment, so there was no surprise attack on the Saxon Army, which easily got away. In 1866 “military necessity” did not trump national policy.

The 1866 Campaign

In 1866 the Elder Moltke was even more strident in demanding mobilization and offensive operations than his nephew would be in 1914. As early as 28 March 1866 he said that the Austrians were massing in Bohemia and that the Prussians had to mobilize, too, warnings Moltke repeated on 29 and 31 March and 2, 3 and 5 April.[[17]](#endnote-17) Moltke was wrong on both counts: the Austrians didn't begin mobilizing until 27 April and they didn't initially deploy to Bohemia at all, but at Ölmutz in Moravia, about 140 kilometres to the east.[[18]](#endnote-18) Moltke’s “brilliant” plan was going to be what the Germans call a *Luftstoss*- it was going to hit only air.

On 2 April 1866, about two and a half months before the start of operations, Moltke made a momentous discovery: the Prussians had five rail lines to the Austrian border, the Austrians had only one rail line to Bohemia. If the Prussians mobilized, and immediately deployed and attacked, then on the 18th day of mobilization they would outnumber the Austrians 143,000 to 117,000, on the 42nd day of mobilization 285,000 to 239,000.[[19]](#endnote-19) This numerical superiority was the sole guarantor of victory and had to be exploited. Moltke began an even more frantic campaign to convince the King to mobilize and immediately attack.

Neither the King nor Bismarck were going to be railroaded by Moltke's multiple arguments for “military necessity” and “war by timetable”. Moltke was only allowed from 3 to 12 May to conduct a partial, then a phased mobilization, and to deploy from 16 May to 6 June. The Prussian army then sat on the border for nine days: Bismarck absolutely refused to allow military operations to start until he had wrung every possible diplomatic and political advantage out of the situation. The King wasn't going to go to war until he was sure that all other avenues were completely exhausted. This stands in stark contrast to the willingness of Bethmann-Hollweg and Wilhelm II in the July Crisis to be dominated by the younger Moltke's demands for “military necessity” and “war by timetable”

In 1866 Moltke's peacetime war plan therefore was dead on arrival and he had to cobble one together from day to day, sometimes from hour to hour. This was Moltke's famous “system of expedients”, which was long on expedients, short on system. Moltke had spread his forces on a 500-kilometre arc in order to make maximum use of the rail lines, and between 19 and 22 June Moltke desperately issued orders to the Elbe, 1st and 2nd Armies to link up at Gitschin, in the assumption that the Austrians were well south of there.[[20]](#endnote-20) There is no trace of the idea that Moltke intended to “march separately to concentrate on the battlefield”. Concentration at Gitschin would require 2nd Army to cross the Elbe. But by now the Austrian commander, Benedek, had outmanoeuvred Moltke, and occupied an interior position on the Elbe, from which he could defeat the Prussian 1st and 2nd Armies in detail. Benedek decided to attack the 1st Army before the 2nd could arrive. The Austrian 6th and 10th Corps were to block 2nd Army. On 27 June the Austrian 6th Corps attacked the 2nd Army's V Corps at Skalitz and was defeated. The Austrian 10th Corps pushed back the 2nd Army's I Corps at Trautenau, but suffered crippling casualties. On 28 June the Prussian Guard again hammered the Austrian 6th Corps at Soor. Benedeck’s plan collapsed not because of Moltke’s strategic genius, but because of the tactical superiority of the Prussian infantry. It is about 200 kilometres straight-line distance from Gitschin to Berlin and due to this distance Moltke had lost control of operations. Moltke did not react to the 27 June battles until 1325 hours on 28 June.[[21]](#endnote-21)

When the Prussian and Austrian armies met at Kõniggrätz in on 3 July 1866 it was, depending on how you figure it, somewhere between the 53rd and 62nd day of mobilization, and by the elder Moltke's own calculations the Prussian window of opportunity had closed long since. The Prussian armies had still not united. Moltke thought that the Austrian Army was on the east side of the Elbe, so he kept 2nd Army on the east side, too. He didn't learn that the Austrians were on the west side until about 0100 hours 3 July, that is, about seven hours before the start of the battle.1st Army was forced to hold off the Austrians until mid-afternoon, when the leading elements of 2nd Army began to arrive. Far from the Prussian armies “uniting on the battlefield”, about 2/3 of the 2nd Army never made it to the battle. During the entire fight it was the Austrians who had numerical superiority, but the battle was won once again by the tactical superiority of the Prussian infantry. However, this fact was lost in the adulation accorded to Moltke’s supposed strategic genius, especially in his “system of expedients”, which was clearly the lesson that the younger Moltke drew from the 1866 campaign.

Neither Schlieffen nor Moltke Ever Intended to Implement the “Schlieffen Plan”

Each German infantry regiment had an *Ersatz* (replacement) battalion. Artillery, cavalry and engineer regiments had similar units. The “Schlieffen Plan” called for the creation of eight corps from these *Ersatz* units.[[22]](#endnote-22) In the 1911 “Schlieffen Plan” map, six of these corps screen the west and south sides of Paris. Schlieffen said that “The greatest need for the eight corps is behind the right wing”[[23]](#endnote-23) He was not entirely sanguine as to how many of them could make it that far, as doing so depended on the state of the Belgian and French rail lines. If they could not reach Paris, the right wing attack would be fatally weakened and forced to confront superior enemy forces.[[24]](#endnote-24)

The first problem is that the *Ersatz* divisions did not exist until 1913.[[25]](#endnote-25) Even the most wildly-optimistic advocate of the “Schlieffen Plan” cannot logically argue that the plan was to the slightest degree operational before 1913. Even Schlieffen was never in the position to be able to execute the “Schlieffen Plan”. Moltke was the Chief of Staff for seven years before he intended to raise *Ersatz* units. The second problem is that in 1913/14 the Germans planned to raise not 16 divisions, but 6. These divisions consisted of men with rifles and a few pieces of artillery: no medical, ration or ammunition supply units. So even if they by some miracle they reached Paris on time, 6 divisions were going to have to cover a sector intended for 12 divisions.

The third problem is that initially it was intended to send five of these divisions to East Prussia![[26]](#endnote-26) The fourth is that Moltke ordered these divisions to Alsace-Lorraine. They began movement on 15 August, and when they completed their movement on 18 August there was no possibility of a right wing attack around Paris. [[27]](#endnote-27) Schlieffen had expressly said that the west and south sides of Paris had to be screened, and there were no forces to do it. This is a decisive refutation of the argument that Moltke was trying to execute the “Schlieffen Plan”.

Younger Moltke's Break with Schlieffen's *Real* Planning

In the Marne Campaign, the younger Moltke's first command decision came on 24 August 1914.[[28]](#endnote-28) The German Army had decisively won the Battle of the Frontiers, but there was a crisis in East Prussia, where the Germans had lost the first battle. The *Aufmarschanweisungen*, the deployment order for 1914, provided that seven corps' worth of rail rolling stock be assembled in the German rear area, spread evenly behind the right, centre and left. Moltke now issued “Be prepared” warning orders to shift six corps, two corps from the right, centre and left, to East Prussia. Moltke then immediately changed his mind, reduced the force going east to three corps, then two, both of which came from the right wing.

The “Schlieffen Plan” myth notwithstanding, the only mention in the *Denkschrift* of moving forces by rail is that of possibly sending two corps from the left wing to the right. There is no mention of sending anything east at all. However, sending forces at this time to East Prussia is in keeping with Schlieffen's 1901 and 1903 *Generalstabsreisen Ost.* So Moltke was obviously initially thinking of executing Schlieffen's *real* doctrine, which was to win the battle in the west, then stop and use rail mobility and interior lines as a force multiplier to shift forces for a counterattack in the east. Had Moltke merely followed Schlieffen's counterattack doctrine and transferred six corps east, then the prospects in the east were glittering. The Battle of the Masurian Lakes took place from 5 to 13 September. With 25 German divisions (instead of 13) the battle would have been a catastrophe for the Russians.

The Elder Moltke, the Younger Moltke, and the Advance on Paris

On 27 August 1914 Moltke issued his first general order of the campaign, telling the right wing to advance into France, indeed *towards Paris*, in order to occupy territory and keep the French from reconstituting their beaten units.[[29]](#endnote-29) This is in complete contradiction with the German 1914 west front intelligence estimate, which said that the French would never withdraw towards Paris, but would pull back to the south, to the French national redoubt on the plateau of Langres.[[30]](#endnote-30) Nor is there any evidence that Moltke had tested the idea of advancing on Paris beforehand.

So where did the younger Moltke get the idea to continue the advance towards Paris?

He got it from the elder Moltke, of course. In any war with France, Moltke's *id*ée *fixe* was to advance on Paris. This is evident in the very beginning of the Elder Moltke's term as Chief of the General Staff, the concept of the 1859 operation involving the seizure of Alsace-Lorraine, followed by an advance on Paris.[[31]](#endnote-31) On 19 August 1870, after Prince Friedrich Karl, the commander of the 2nd Army, had shut up Bazaine's army at Metz, Moltke directed the 3rd and 4th Armies to march on Paris.[[32]](#endnote-32) He assumed that MacMahon would have to move to block him. In fact, MacMahon tried to slip past Moltke's right to break the siege of Metz and link up with Bazaine, putting the united French armies in Moltke's rear. Moltke was saved from disaster only by the slowness of the French march and the fact that MacMahon's movements were reported in a British newspaper and transmitted to Moltke, a genuine *deus ex machina* if there ever was one. On 4 September, after the Crown Princes of Prussia and Saxony, the commanders of the 3rd and 4th Armies, had destroyed last French army at Sedan (with no guidance from Moltke) and captured Napoleon III, Moltke again directed the 3rd and 4th Armies to march on Paris.[[33]](#endnote-33) The pace he set was positively leisurely. He had no inkling of what this would accomplish, or what he would do when he got there. On 8 September he thought that it might force a diplomatic end to the war, on 12 and 24 September that civil disorder in the city would do his job for him. There had been a revolt in Paris, but the result was a repetition of 1793, *la patrie en danger* and the *levée en masse,* and French armies seemed to rise out of the ground. He had always been sceptical of the ability of the Prussian army to lay siege to the huge fortress-city, but now he had no choice, and by 20 September he had the city surrounded, but it took the nearly the entire available German field force to do it, while his siege lines and lines of communication both were threatened by the new Republican armies. Having made no preparations for a siege, he had to improvise them, and progress was glacially slow. On 27 August 1914 the younger Moltke had no more idea what he was going to do when he got to Paris than the Elder Moltke had in 1870: both men were fervently hoping for another *deus ex machina.*

In order to cover the withdrawal of the British Army, on 29 August 1914 the French 5th Army turned to fight the German 2nd Army on the Guise. The German 2nd Army won the battle, but did not pursue. On 31 August the German 1st Army turned southeast in order to catch up with and attack the French left flank, to which Moltke gave his approval. Moltke, the 1st Army commander, Kluck, and his chief of staff, Kuhl, were all hoping to catch the French left flank and roll it up before the French withdrew to the Marne or Seine. This was sheer desperation. Advancing on Paris had failed, the French main armies were damaged but were going to get away. There would be no *deus ex machina.*

Moltke's Advance East of Paris, 2-5 September 1914

In the 1906 “Schlieffen Plan” *Denkschrift* the German right wing 1st Army moves to the west of Paris. Herwig thinks that Schlieffen did so in order to take Paris, maintaining that the Schlieffen Plan “envisaged first the siege and then the battering of Fortress Paris by seven or eight corps”[[34]](#endnote-34) It is an article of faith amongst advocates of the “Schlieffen Plan” that in 1914 Paris would have fallen by the 42nd day of mobilization, not that this was ever mentioned in the *Denkschrift* itself.[[35]](#endnote-35) In 1870-71 the city held out for four months, even though practically the entire French active army had been destroyed – hardly the case in 1914. A siege of Paris in 1914 was therefore completely out of the question. August 1914 was also not May 1940: the French in 1914 would have defended Paris to the last ditch – consider their terrific resistance at Verdun in 1916.

In any case, Schlieffen never advocated an attack on Paris. This is another of Herwig's fabrications. Schlieffen's stated reasoning for the attack west *around* Paris was:[[36]](#endnote-36)

The position on the Oise is supposed to be weak to the front, but it is supported on the left by such a colossal fortress as Paris. If the position is broken to the front [which is what occurred in 1914 – Z] the defender would retreat behind the Marne or the Seine. The victor must be satisfied with blockading Paris first on the northern front, then on still other fronts, and finds himself forced to continue the attack with considerably reduced forces against a numerically superior enemy. In order to bring the enemy out of this new position, it will be necessary to go around the left flank, which is supported by Paris, and thereby once again commit considerable forces for blockading the west and south sides of the great fortress. One thing is clear. If the French do not do us the favour (*Liebesdienst*) of attacking,[[37]](#endnote-37) and we have to move against the positions on the Aisne, Reims-La Fère and the Oise, we will be forced - regardless of whether the enemy holds the Aisne-Oise etc. positions or if they fall back behind the Marne or the Seine - to pursue them with one part of our forces, and to go around to the south of Paris with another force and encircle the fortress. We would therefore do well to prepare beforehand to cross the Seine below the confluence with the Oise [north of Paris] and to first blockade Paris on the west and south sides. These preparations can be made any way that you like: it will soon become clear that we will be too weak to continue the operation in this direction. We will have the same experience as that of all previous conquerors, that offensive warfare both requires and uses up very strong forces, that these forces continually become weaker even as those of the defender become stronger, and that this is especially true in a land that bristles with fortress.

And again:[[38]](#endnote-38)

It is therefore doubtful if [in order to protect their eastern fortresses from the rear] in spite of all of its deficiencies as a defensive position, the French would not seek to hold the Oise, and the question is, could they not successfully? In this case, Paris must be enveloped from the south. This will also be necessary if the French fall back from the Oise and the Aisne behind the Marne, the Seine, etc. If we allow them to fall back further in this direction, it will lead to an endless war.

In other words, Schlieffen said that a German attack east of Paris would be stopped on the Aisne, or the Oise or the Marne or the Seine. For that reason the German army needed to have 82 active and reserve divisions, so that 14 divisions could outflank those lines by moving around the west and south Paris, and therefore 12 *Ersatz* divisions were needed to protect the 1st Army's flanks and rear by blockading the west and south sides of Fortress Paris. This is the manoeuvre shown on the real Schlieffen Plan map: an envelopment to the west of Paris, with no movement east of Paris: the rest of the right wing stops on the Aisne and Oise.[[39]](#endnote-39) In spite of Schlieffen's warning that an attack east of Paris would fail, Moltke attacked east of Paris – and was stopped on the Marne, exactly as Schlieffen said that he would be. This is proof, if such is still needed, that *Moltke was in no way following the “Schlieffen plan”.*

In fact, Schlieffen was also saying that even with 24 non-existent divisions, the German army was not strong enough to execute the right-wing attack to the west of Paris: “it will soon become clear that we will be too weak to continue the operation in this direction”. Moreover, even if the French were forced to retreat from the Seine, they could pull back to the south – the Plateau of Langres – leading to “an endless war”. Schlieffen was saying that any attack into central France was not going to succeed, that *the* *“Schlieffen Plan” would fail.*

Moltke's advance southeast of Paris had now left the elder Moltke's template behind, too: his uncle had never contemplated such a thing. What was left was the elder Moltke's “system of expedients”, which is to say, half-baked snap decisions. By 2 September 1914 it was clear to Moltke that while the Germans were moving southeast of Paris, the French were building up their forces in Paris, threatening the German right flank. Moltke had to change his concept of the operation again: he directed 1st Army to cover the German army's right flank against Paris, while 2nd Army turned the French left. This idea was half-baked, because it was extremely unlikely that 2nd Army, which was hardly even in contact with the French, was ever going to find their flank, as the French could merely withdraw to the Seine if need be. In addition, Kluck and Kuhl decided to make themselves the heroes of the campaign, blithely ignoring Moltke's instruction and, leaving only three weak reserve brigades facing Paris, plunged south in order to get at the British and the French left flank themselves.

By 5 September even Kluck and Kuhl recognized that the 1st Army was never going to find the French flank, and the operation had reached Clausewitz's “culmination point” and was lurching to a halt. Moltke ordered *both* 1st and 2nd Armies to take up defensive positions against Paris, while 5th Army tried to link up with 6th Army in Lorraine.[[40]](#endnote-40) Once again, this has nothing whatsoever to do with the “Schlieffen Plan”. Moltke was improvising, just as his uncle had done. Kluck and Kuhl decided to ignore this order, too, and instead of protecting the 2nd Army's flank, left it wide open in order to move about 50 kilometres to the north in order to attack the French 6th Army.

After the war Kuhl justified his serial bad judgement by arguing that OHL at Luxembourg was too far away from 1st Army HQ, and was therefore unable to read the fast-changing situation, so that 1st Army had to do what it saw fit. In fact, in choosing his HQ location, the younger Moltke was once again following the example set by his uncle.

As we have seen, in 1866 Moltke was in Berlin while the critical actions were taking place in Bohemia. On 6 August 1870 Moltke was at Mainz, 145 kilometres from 3rd Army and 155 kilometres from the 2nd, and completely out of touch. On 6 August the German 3rd Army had attacked the French at Woerth and Moltke did not hear of it until 1850 hours. The German 2nd Army had made contact with the French at Forbach early on the morning of 6 August: Moltke did not learn of it until 2215 hours. Moltke did not telegraph instructions to 3rd Army until 0930 7 August, and 2nd Army at 1100 7 August, which means he had no influence on operations that day.[[41]](#endnote-41) In both 1866 and 1870 the Prussian Army made heavy initial contact with the Prussian HQ so far to the rear that it had lost contact with the forward armies and effectively abdicated control of operations.

For most of the Marne Campaign the German Headquarters, OHL, was at Luxembourg City, at worst 220 kilometres from the right-wing 1st Army HQ. It had excellent communication with 8th Army in East Prussia, a vital consideration, as well as with 6th Army in Lorraine, and good communications with all but 1st and 2nd Armies. The younger Moltke, like his uncle, used his principal staff officers as liaison officers, and given motor vehicle mobility these were able to tour the right-wing armies and report in the same day. The younger Moltke's command and control at the beginning of the campaign was significantly superior to that of his uncle in 1866 and 1870.

The difference between 1866 and 1870 on the one hand, and 1914 on the other, was that, from 29 June to 3 July 1866 (Königgrätz), 5-7 August 1870 (crossing the Pfälzerwald) and on 18 August 1870 (St. Privat) the commander at the decisive spot was Prince Friedrich Karl of Prussia, the most capable Prussian soldier of his generation. The younger Moltke's problem was not the location of his HQ, but the insubordination of Kluck and Kuhl. Had 1st Army merely obeyed orders, there most likely never would have been a Battle of the Marne, because Joffre would not have had an unprotected German flank to attack. Had Joffre attacked anyway, the French 6th Army would not have encountered three reserve brigades, but the entire 1st Army and, ironically, Kluck and Kuhl would have actually won a major battle, something that had eluded them so far.[[42]](#endnote-42)

This is not to say that the Germans would have won the Battle of the Marne: far from it. The German advance was stuck fast with a completely-open 230 kilometre-long flank. The German right wing was going to have to pull back in any case. Schlieffen had been right, of course: an attack east of Paris was doomed to failure.

Moltke's surprise attack on Liège had nothing to do with Schlieffen, but was based on his uncle's plans for surprise attacks in 1856/66. On 24 August Moltke initially intended to execute Schlieffen's counterattack doctrine, then did not. On 27 August Moltke, following his uncle's example, advanced on Paris. On 2 September he ordered an attack east of Paris, in spite of the fact that Schlieffen had explicitly said that such an attack would fail. On 5 September he admitted that this attack had failed and that, in effect, the situation was out of control.

In 1914 the younger Moltke tried to employ the elder Moltke's planning, which had nothing to do with the “Schlieffen Plan”. The attack on Liège was a fiasco. In the 13 days between 24 August and 5 September the younger Moltke issued orders which threw overboard 15 years of Schlieffen's planning and he radically changed his concept of the operation four times. The result of Moltkean planning and its “system of expedients” was a disaster.

1. Holger Herwig, *The Marne 1914* (Random House, 2009) 36-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bundesarchiv-Miliärarchiv (BA-MA) Freiburg im Breisgau, *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43/137 (Handwritten). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. BA-MA) RH 61/v.96, 1913/14. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43/138, Moltke's comments, 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Herwig, *Marne*, 36-7. Herwig says that Schlieffen “meticulously crafted his grand design. The first twenty days of mobilization were laid out to the minute for 20.800 trains...” By Herwig's own admission, this included at least 16 divisions that didn't exist. So, according to Herwig, about 20% of these trains were running around empty. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Herwig, *Marne*, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Neue Deutsche Biographie, Moltke [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. T. Zuber, *The Moltke Myth: Prussian War Planning 1857-1871* (History Press, 2008), *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning 1871-1914* (OUP, 2002), *The Real German War Plan 1904-1914* (History Press, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Geoffrey Wawro *The Austro-Prussian War* (Cambridge UP, 1996) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning* (Berg, 1991)and *Moltke and the German Wars* (Palgrave, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Eberhard Kessel, *Moltke* (Koehler, 1957), [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. BA-MA, PH 3.646 Schlußbesprechung Kriegsspiel November-Dezember 1905. Maps BA-MA N43/133 *Nachlass* Schlieffen. Also Bayerisches Kriegsarchiv Munich, Generalstab 1237. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Generalstab des Heeres, *Die Grossen Gemneralstabsreisen – Ost – aus den Jahren 1891-1905* (Berlin, 1938). 1901 *Ost* 175-230, 1903 *Ost* 231-308. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Grosser Generalstab, *Moltkes Militärische Werke I. Militärische Korrespondenz 4. Theil Aus den Dienstschriften des Jahres 1859* (Berlin, 1902), 71-121 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Dienstschriften des Krieges 1866* (Berlin, 1896), 31-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. T. Zuber, *Ten Days in August. The Siege of Liège* (History Press, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Grosser Generalstab, Moltkes Militärische Werke I. Militärische Korrespondenz 2. Theil Aus den Dienstschriften des Krieges 1866 (Berlin, 1896),* 67-74, [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Oskar von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Geschichte des Krieges von 1866 in Deutschland (2 vols. Berlin, 1896)* I, 28. Heinrich Friedjung, *Der Kampf um die Vorherrschaft in Deutschland 1859 bis 1866* (2 vols. 4th ed. Berlin, 1900) I, 207-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Dienstschriften des Krieges 1866,* 102-181. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Dienstschriften des Krieges 1866*,231, 234. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Dienstschriften des Krieges 1866*, 238-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43/138, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43/138, 14. Trans. Zuber, *German War Planning* 1891-1914 (Boydell and Brewer 2004), 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43/138, 11. Trans. Zuber, *German War Planning*, 195. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. BA-MA RH61/v96, 1913/14 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Reichsarchiv *Der Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1925) I, 184 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Reichsarchiv *Der Weltkrieg* I, 185, 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. T. Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, 273-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (GLA) 659 OHL Operations Order 27 August [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. BA-MA PH 3/628 *Aufmarsch und opeartive Absichten der Franzosen*. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Moltke's Militärische Korrespondenz 1859,* 103-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Grosser Generalstab, *Moltkes Militärische Werke I. Militärische Korrespondenz 3. Theil Aus den Dienstschriften des Krieges 1870* (Berlin, 1896) 235-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *Dienstschriften des Krieges 1870,* 286, 290, 307, Groser Generalstab, *Moltke in der Vorbereitung und Durchführung der Operationen* (Berlin, 1905) 149. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Herwig, *The Marne*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. For just one example, Martin Gilbert, *The First World War* (Holt, 1994) 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43/138 (typed) 10-12. Translation T. Zuber, *German War Planing 1891-1914. Sources and Interpretations*, (Boydell and Brewer, 2004) 194-5 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Schlieffen was referring to a major French attack into Lorraine and the Saarland, a recurring theme of his exercises. Major French forces would then be fixed out of position and unable to redeploy to face the German right wing. From this point of view, the German victories in Lorraine and the Ardennes in the Battle of the Frontiers were unfortunate, because by 24 August the French armies had been forced back to their start lines on French territory. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schliieffen, N43/138, 16-17. Trans. Zuber, *German War Planning* 197-8 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. BA-MA *Nachlass* Schlieffen N43, 141K Schlieffen Plan maps. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Generallandesarchiv (GLA) Karlsruhe 659 OHL Operations Order 5 September 1914 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Dienstschriften des Krieges 1870,* 201-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Had Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, the commander of 6th Army, or the Duke of Württemberg, the commander of the 4th Army, been on the right flank, and not Kluck and Kuhl, the Marne Campaign would surely have resulted in the destruction of the BEF at least. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)