

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 80

### “Keep the Right Wing Very Strong”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Ever since the Franco-Russian alliance that was first announced twenty years ago, Germany has faced the unpleasant prospect of fighting a two-front war.

Germany’s solution to this seemingly insoluble problem was what became perhaps the most famous war plan in history: the Schlieffen Plan, in which most of the German Army would attack France, and most of that attack would be a surprise offensive through neutral Belgium, aimed at nothing less than knocking France out of the war before her ally Russia would be fully mobilized. This would mean fighting all the way to Paris in less than six weeks, in an age when armies still march on foot.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 80. Keep the Right Wing Very Strong.

When the Great War began in 1914, it had been not quite a century since the last general war in Europe. A lot had changed in that not-quite-a-century.

But it isn’t as if there were no wars among the Great Powers during this time. There were plenty. There were the wars of Italian unification. There were the Crimean War, the Austro-Prussian War, the Russo-Turkish War, and the Russo-Japanese War. There were the Boer War and the Spanish-American War and the Philippine War. Most influential of all was the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. All of these wars had lessons to teach. Military planners picked up on some of these lessons, and ignored others. We have discussed this at some length on this podcast.

Back in the Napoleonic era, France astonished the world by converting its citizen republic revolutionary zeal into mass conscription, and fielded armies capable of defeating all comers. When Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812, he commanded a force of nearly 700,000 soldiers, a mammoth army larger than anything Europe had ever seen before.

But armies in the nineteenth century still got to where they needed to go by marching, which was slow and tiring to the soldiers. And there was the matter of supply. Perhaps Napoleon's most famous dictum about warfare was that "an army is a creature which marches on its stomach." In Napoleon's day, armies had to carry their food and ammunition with them, or else forage off the land, no small feat for an army of 700,000.

By the time of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the Prussians were able to field an army of 1.2 million, close to double the size of Napoleon's army. France, the nation that had pioneered mass conscription, had only managed to field 900,000, despite a larger population.

Conscription was the norm among the European Great Powers by the early twentieth century, with the exception of Britain, which still relied on a volunteer army. The British, of course, had the Royal Navy to defend the home islands, and meant her Army more for control and defense of her enormous colonial empire rather than for meddling in Europe.

But everyone else had conscription. Soldiers were drafted into active duty for a period—two years at a minimum, perhaps longer—during which they received training. After active duty, soldiers remained in the reserve, called up for periodic refresher training, and available if needed to be mobilized for war. Germany was the acknowledged leader in building, training, and maintaining an army. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the German Army had over half a million on active duty at any given time, plus the ability to mobilize a further 3.5 million, a staggering number. What could the other European powers do, but try to match those numbers as best they could.

Populations were growing in every country in Europe, and a larger population means a larger potential army, but large armies pose complex logistical problems. The German Army that invaded France in 1870 was larger than the population of Prussia's capital, Berlin. You need trains, lots of them, moving in a coordinated way to assemble a force this large. Railroads also make it possible to feed and supply your army directly from the farms and factories of your home country, even as it advances into enemy territory. So armies no longer have to carry their own supplies, or forage. But all these soldiers and all these supplies and equipment have to be shipped to just the right places at just the right times. That takes a lot of planning.

And then there's the problem of moving these large formations. You can't just point and tell a whole army, "Go thataway," the way generals did in the old days. You try that, you're likely to create huge traffic jams and mass confusion, during which your army will fall victim to a surprise attack from an enemy army that has thought ahead and already solved all these problems.

And that brings us to Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, who was the chief of staff for Prussia, and then for Germany, for over thirty years. Now, I've already mentioned a Helmuth von Moltke who was chief of staff in the twentieth century, and indeed is chief of staff as the Great War begins in 1914. That Helmuth von Moltke is this Helmuth von Moltke's nephew. The Moltke I

want to talk about right now, the uncle, sometimes called Moltke the Elder, was the mastermind of the Prussian victory in 1870.

Moltke was born in 1800. His family was one of the Junkers, the great Prussian landowning families. “Junker” is a contraction of the German words “jung herr,” or “young lord.” In contrast to German aristocrats from western and southern Germany, whom the Junkers dismissed as effete and self-indulgent, the Junkers were disciplined, conservative, devout, and valued duty and honor above everything. Those western and southern aristocrats dismissed the Junkers in return as stiff, pompous, and narrow-minded, a stereotype that lives on to this day.

But whatever else the Junkers were, they were excellent soldiers, and had a long tradition of military service. Aristocratic Junker officers were the backbone of Prussia’s amazing army during the reign of Frederick the Great. Two centuries later, the descendants of those same Junker families went to war for Hitler in 1939.

Moltke was a typical Junker; he also had a keen mind and was highly educated. And as the Industrial Revolution unfolded, armies became larger, and the world in general more complicated, Moltke was one of the first to grasp modern concepts of management of large organizations. He understood the need for uniform systems, procedures, and training, dedicated planning, and a shared sense of purpose. Margaret MacMillan says in her excellent book *The War That Ended Peace* that under different circumstances, Moltke might have become Germany’s Henry Ford. As it was, he became the man who invented modern warfare.

A key innovation was the general staff, a whole new concept in organizing armies. Field officers couldn’t be expected to take on responsibilities like devising railway timetables. They needed to focus on combat. And so the general staff was there to worry about the management side of modern warfare. Prussian field officers continued to be aristocratic Junkers who thought in terms of duty and honor and keeping up morale and setting a good example. General staffs were more of a meritocracy. These officers were more likely to be commoners, but also more likely to be highly educated and have accomplished résumés.

The role of the general staff was nothing less than to plan out the war ahead of time. Staff officers collected and studied maps and drew up railway timetables, kept abreast of equipment and supplies, collected information on potential enemies, their armies, equipment, and likely strategies, and drew up mobilization plans for times of war, often multiple plans for multiple contingencies. These plans were hundreds of pages long, and had to be tested and revised continually to keep them relevant.

The Franco-Prussian War was the moment when all Europe found out how useful these innovations could be. The French believed themselves to be as well-prepared as the Prussians, but soon learned otherwise. The Prussians were able to get German troops where they wanted them, when they wanted them, while the smaller French Army was consistently slower, more confused, and more likely to leave stragglers behind.

The result was a brilliant Prussian victory and the creation of Imperial Germany. The other result was that every other Great Power in Europe got itself a general staff and started drawing up mobilization plans. This leaves the Germans with a problem. What do you do after everyone else has seen your secret weapon in action and then adopted it for themselves?

Moltke's answer to that question was this: if everyone in Europe is going to be doing mobilization plans, then Germany was going to have the *best* mobilization plan in Europe. If every country was going to have a general staff, then Germany was going to have to have the *best* general staff. That's all there was to it.

And the German general staff was widely recognized across Europe as the finest soldiers and strategists. There was a saying at the time that there were five perfect institutions in Europe: The Vatican, the British Parliament, Russian ballet, French opera, and the German General Staff.

And that brings us to Moltke's successor as chief of staff, Feldmarschal Alfred von Schlieffen. Schlieffen was born in 1833 to another Junker family with a history of military service, and was Chief of the German General Staff from 1891 to 1906. Unlike Moltke, who was something of a renaissance man—he wrote poems and novels in his spare time—Schlieffen had a reputation of being strictly military, first, last, and always. He reputedly read accounts of famous battles to his two daughters for their bedtime stories. He's also said to have been out on a drive one day when one of his subordinates pointed out a nearby river and remarked how beautiful it was. Schlieffen supposedly glanced at it, scoffed, and dismissed it as “an insignificant obstacle.”

There's a good chance you already recognize his name as being associated with the famous “Schlieffen Plan,” the campaign plan executed by the Germans at the beginning of the Great War. What came to be called the “Schlieffen Plan,” was drawn up by many people in the General Staff, of course, not by one man working alone, and the plan was further modified after he retired in 1906. Still, history calls it the “Schlieffen Plan.”

Schlieffen loved military history, and his favorite battle was Cannae. That was the battle in which the Carthaginians under Hannibal destroyed a numerically superior Roman Army by outflanking and encircling it. We've all listened to *The History of Rome*, right? He also studied Sedan, the crucial battle of the Franco-Prussian War, in which the German forces surrounded a French Army and captured Napoleon III himself. Schlieffen drew the reasonable conclusion that a numerically inferior army was capable of defeating a larger one by relying on the shrewd use of flanking maneuvers.

Schlieffen became Chief of Staff just as the Franco-Russian alliance began to come together, as we've talked about. Once that alliance had been accomplished, it became the responsibility of the General Staff to draw up mobilization plans for possible wars with France, or Russia, or both.

And so they did. There was a battle plan for a war against France only. There was a plan for a war against Russia only. And there were two plans for the contingency that Germany might find

itself at war with both powers at the same time. In that case, Schlieffen and his staff reasoned, the German Army could easily find itself outnumbered on both fronts, and defeat seemed likely, unless something clever was done.

The something clever they came up with was this: instead of Germany dividing its army into two equal halves and thus insuring both halves would be outgunned and overwhelmed, it would make more sense for Germany to divide its forces into something like an 80-20 split, with the smaller force taking a purely defensive position on one front, possibly with the help of Germany's allies, Austria and Italy, while going on the offensive on the other front. And so there was a plan for a Russian offensive, with a holding action against the French, with Italian assistance, and a plan for a French offensive, with a holding action against the Russians, with Austrian assistance.

As time passed, though, the Russian offensive plan fell out of favor. Although Russia had the larger army, it would be slower to mobilize and was generally regarded as inferior to the other European armies, especially after the Russo-Japanese War. But Russia was large, and a mass German offensive into Russia ran the risk of getting bogged down for a long time, especially if the Russians retreated and forced the German Army deeper and deeper into Russian territory, as they had done to Napoleon in 1812. While all that was going on, the much better French Army would quickly mobilize, presumably go on the offensive, and it was not at all clear that a thin defensive screen in the west would hold the French back for all the time it would take to finish off the Russians. And doubly so if the British got involved.

And so, *the* plan for a war against the Franco-Russian alliance—the one that history calls the Schlieffen Plan—would be the other one: the French offensive with a screening force to hold off the Russians. The Russians would be easier to hold back because they would take longer to mobilize and not fight as well even after mobilization. Also, the presence of the Austrian Army on the Russian left flank meant that Russia could not devote her full strength to an offensive against Germany alone, but would have to contend with the Austrian Army as well. When you consider how valuable that Austrian Army would be in the event of a Russian offensive, then you begin to understand why Germany has been so keen on keeping Austria as an ally throughout this period, especially once Italy began to drift away.

Another attraction of the western offensive is that France is a smaller country. It would take much less time to march an army to Paris than to St. Petersburg. And the historical fact is that German armies defeated France in a matter of weeks back in 1870. If history could be made to repeat itself, and France defeated as quickly again, it would be feasible to come to some kind of armistice agreement with France, and then wheel the German Army around to the east, taking advantage of Germany's well-developed rail net, and then begin a whole new offensive against the Russians.

So that's the Schlieffen Plan in a nutshell. And in the early years of the twentieth century, as the Triple Entente came together and Germany increasingly felt surrounded and isolated, and the

prospect of war against either France or Russia alone without the other one intervening seemed increasingly remote, the Schlieffen Plan became Germany's master plan for survival.

I say survival because German elites increasingly felt hemmed in and believed it was a question of when, not if, there would be a showdown between Germany and her enemies. The Schlieffen Plan offered Germany the key to unlocking the cell in which her enemies were attempting to imprison her.

[music: "Ride of the Valkyries"]

Naturally, the French had taken notice of the Franco-Prussian War as well, and they had taken steps to prevent another collapse as had happened in 1870. So any German plan to reproduce the result of 1870 has to take these French steps into account. First of all, the French had upgraded their fortifications along the German border. Although the French viewed Germany's annexation of Alsace and Lorraine as a national catastrophe, the silver lining for France is that the new Franco-German border is actually shorter and easier to defend. The French also built up fortifications in the vicinity of Paris, to make the city less vulnerable to a quick German offensive.

Remember how I said Schlieffen loved to study the battle of Cannae and admired flank attacks? His answer to the question of how to take France out of the war in spite of her improved fortifications was the largest flanking attack ever conceived in military history. The German army in the west would have only limited defensive forces along the border with France. The bulk of the German force, over 90%, would be positioned for a lightning invasion of Belgium.

Belgium was at this point an independent nation for about 75 years. She had never fought in a war, and her neutrality was guaranteed by all the major powers, including France and Germany. During the Franco-Prussian War, both sides had scrupulously respected Belgian borders. French units had surrendered rather than escape the Germans by crossing the border.

Germany had no grievance against Belgium, but Schlieffen would argue, and the German General Staff would come to accept as a foundational principle, that necessity decreed a German advance through Belgium. And Luxembourg, and the Netherlands as well, in Schlieffen's original formulation. Unfortunate, yes. Regrettable, yes. But absolutely necessary.

This mass offensive would pass through Belgium as quickly and efficiently as possible, securing the roads and railroads for communication and supply, and continue on into France, along a route the French did not expect, a massive right hook that would cut off and incapacitate any French attempt to attack into Germany farther south, as well as sweep across northeastern France, cross the Seine, and isolate and capture Paris itself. In precisely forty days.

An entire generation of German staff officers would have it drilled into them throughout their careers that the invasion of Belgium was necessary, or else Germany was as good as defeated.

They would come to view this as self-evident, to the point that the German General Staff and government would be surprised, when the hammer actually came down, that the Belgians and the rest of the world didn't see it the same way.

In fact, this was a weakness in German war planning. I already touched on the question of decision making in Imperial Germany in episode 41, and we see the same problem here. Invading Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands—the Low Countries—was part of the German war plan because the General Staff decided to make it so. The decision was made internally, within the military, and once made, the plan was put in a safe and never discussed with anyone, not even the civilian leadership. In particular, no one consulted with the Foreign Office on the question of what the diplomatic fallout might be from Germany beginning a war by attacking three innocent and neutral small countries. Because the General Staff are the professionals, right? So just back off and let them do their thing. It was not until 1912 that at last the German Chancellor (Bethmann-Hollweg by then) was even told what was in the plan. And, significantly, even as it all went down, no one in civilian leadership tried to stop the invasions, or even criticized the move or is even recorded as having complained about the diplomatic consequences.

The Schlieffen Plan presupposes war with both France and Russia. There were separate plans for dealing with one opponent or the other alone. But a key problem with the plan was that the whole enormous mechanism in the west begins to move even in response to a provocation in the east, even if Germany's western flank remains quiet. So this puts Germany in the role of being the aggressor in the West even if they're fighting defensively in the East.

Because, you see, the Schlieffen Plan was innovative in another way, one that is seldom talked about, but is crucial to understanding the plan. At this time, mobilization plans were understood to be plans for calling up your army and depositing it on the frontier. Only when mobilization was complete, perhaps several weeks later, would your army begin its offensive. The Schlieffen Plan was different. The Schlieffen Plan amounted to a rolling offensive. The active-duty army would begin the offensive into Belgium immediately, as soon as mobilization was ordered, and then, as reservists were activated and put on trains, they would be shipped, not to the border, but directly into enemy territory as it was captured. The first wave to Brussels, the second wave to Lille, you get the idea. Each new trainload of reservists would be delivered directly to a front-line position, where the soldiers could reinforce an offensive already under way.

This is an enormous undertaking. Scheduling trains to deliver soldiers and supplies to the right places quickly and efficiently is hard enough; coordinating these shipments with an offensive into enemy territory is mind boggling. Army  $x$  needs to secure objective  $y$  by time  $t$  so that train  $z$  can deliver its troops and equipment to that location in time for the next stage of the advance. Then we're going to do it all over again. It is the military equivalent of differential calculus.

So the biggest surprise the Schlieffen Plan has in store for the French is not the right hook through Belgium, which the French General Staff already had an inkling of by 1914. It is how big that punch is going to be, and how quickly Germany is going to be able to throw it. The German General Staff expects to have German units marching through French territory, disrupting the French mobilization before the French have had time to complete it.

The 72-year old Schlieffen was kicked by a horse in 1905, which apparently convinced him it was time to retire, although he would survive until January 1913, passing away at the age of 79, just nineteen months before the outbreak of the war he had helped plan. Although it is very probably apocryphal, Schlieffen is often quoted as having said on his deathbed, "Keep the right wing very strong."

Schlieffen's successor as Chief of the General Staff, as you know, was the younger Helmuth von Moltke, the nephew and eponym of the guy we talked about a few minutes ago. This Moltke is often dismissed as not up to the standard of his uncle and Schlieffen. Some argue that he won the position on the strength of his name and his personal friendship with the Kaiser. That may be true, but you also have to wonder if history's judgment isn't based too much on the fact that when the Great War actually happened, he was the unlucky guy on the hot seat.

In the eight years he was Chief of Staff prior to the war, the younger Moltke made changes to the German war plans, and as soon as the war was over the criticism began that Moltke took Schlieffen's intricate and finely balanced war plan and mucked it up, and you still hear this said today. Sometimes the claim is made that if Moltke had followed Schlieffen's plan to the letter, Germany would have accomplished the quick defeat of France she was striving for.

To me, this whole argument reeks of a search for a scapegoat by right-wing German bitter enders, and Moltke makes a useful scapegoat, since he died in 1916 and wouldn't be around to defend himself after the war. These war plans were never thought of as perfect and unchanging; it was the role of the General Staff to continually run exercises to test and improve them.

Moltke's changes were in fact quite reasonable when you look at them in context. Most famously, he strengthened the German left flank (the troops that would be defending the French border) at the expense of the right flank, the soldiers who would be running the offensive. He also tapped the right flank to beef up the garrison facing the Russians in East Prussia. He may have violated Schlieffen's charge to keep the right wing very strong, but he did it in response to larger French and Russian deployments in those sectors. Revising the war plan to take changing circumstances into account is part of his job description. The suggestion that it was somehow Moltke's responsibility to preserve every jot and tittle of the Schlieffen Plan exactly as it had been laid down in 1906, even though the French and the Russians were shifting around their own deployments doesn't stand up to two seconds' worth of scrutiny, yet somehow this bit of German right-wing delusion is still with us today.



Moltke also nixed the German invasion of the Netherlands. If you look at a map of the Netherlands, you will find a narrow strip of Dutch territory that includes the city of Maastricht running south along what would otherwise be the German-Belgian border. Schlieffen believed that control of this strip was necessary to get that right flank properly launched across the Low Countries and into France. Under Moltke, the General Staff decided it would be better to keep the Netherlands neutral. Neutral Dutch ports might prove useful to Germany in the event of a British blockade, while a hostile Netherlands would provide those same ports to the British, who might land troops there and possibly outflank the German thrust into France.

On the other hand, giving up that strip of Dutch territory meant that the bulk of the German Army now had to march through a much narrower gateway between the Dutch border in the north, and the French fortifications at Verdun in the south, which anchor the northern end of the French defensive line. And square in the middle of that gateway lies the gatekeeper, the Belgian fortifications at Liège. Not an ideal situation.

But the most consequential decision the General Staff made under Moltke's leadership was to abandon altogether the plan for a war against Russia alone. Apparently, they decided the possibility of a Russian war while France remained neutral had become too remote to bother with. Of course, one other option might have been for Germany to wage an offensive against Russia while keeping a small defensive army along the French border, a sort of reverse Schlieffen plan, but Schlieffen had dismissed this possibility over a decade ago, and it appears no one ever revisited it.

In hindsight, if you want to imagine a set of circumstances under which Germany actually wins this war, you might well start with this scenario: the reverse Schlieffen plan. When the war was actually fought, it was a Russian collapse, not a French one, that gave Germany her best shot at victory. That collapse might have come quite a bit sooner had the Germans attacked Russia faster and harder.

On the other hand, it's likely this was not considered because everyone knew that a Russian offensive, under even the most optimistic assumptions, would take not weeks, but years. Remember how Jan Bloch predicted back in 1899 that modern warfare would degenerate into long, drawn-out wars of attrition until one side or the other experienced economic collapse? The German General Staff remembers him, and the Schlieffen Plan is the General Staff's rebuttal, a claim that a quick and decisive victory is still possible even in the twentieth century, and the painful and drawn-out war that Bloch envisioned could still be avoided.

The great irony of the plan, one that would work to Germany's serious detriment once war actually came, was that a European crisis sparked by a confrontation between Austria and Russia in the Balkans would trigger a war in which the first army to cross a border would be German, and the nations invaded would be Luxembourg and Belgium, small, innocent states in Western Europe, a thousand miles removed from the scene of the original confrontation.

The Schlieffen plan was as complete and comprehensive a war plan as any military organization in history had ever produced. It was everything from soup to nuts, so to speak. It began with small steps that could be taken in secret, such as the cancellation of leaves in preparation for mobilization, all the way up through the initial assault upon the enemy and a plan for final victory. The Schlieffen plan did not dictate every offensive move between Aachen and Paris. In fact, the German military, in spite of its Junker reputation for conformity and following of orders without question, did in fact give considerable freedom of initiative to the commanders of front line units, allowing them to take advantage of battlefield opportunities as they emerged, without having to contact headquarters and ask permission. That was another strength of the Prussian, and later German, military model.

The other major powers had war plans as well, although none were as thorough and comprehensive as the Schlieffen plan. We'll talk about some more of these next time. This time, however, let's take a closer look at Russia.

[music]

Russian military planners understood their position pretty well. It's not complicated. In the event of a major war, Russia is likely to find herself facing both Austria and Germany. Now, in 1914, Russia has a population of about 175,000,000 people, twice the size of the United States at the time, and thanks to mass conscription, they have far and away the largest army in Europe.

The Russo-Japanese War, though, was a big blow to the Russian military. It exposed weaknesses in Russian command and organization, consumed many years' worth of arms and ammunition production, and badly hurt morale. Russia has spent the past eight years rebuilding its military. Because of corruption and political instability, training is iffy, morale is still low, and the weapons stockpiles still aren't what they ought to be. On the plus side, there's still that huge army, and, as I've mentioned repeatedly, Russia has been working hard, with French financing, to enlarge and upgrade its railroad network.

Even so, Russia is a huge country. The average Russian reservist upon mobilization will have to travel twice as far as his Austrian or German counterpart just to get to the depot where he will be inducted, issued his uniform, and put on a train for the front. And then those train trips will be longer as well. The bottom line is that in 1914, the Germans expected to be able to mobilize their full army in twelve days, the Austrians in sixteen days, but the best Russia can hope for is 26 days. When you consider this, the pressure on the Emperor to begin mobilization becomes easier to understand.

Russian military planners were perpetual pessimists. It's a Slav thing, I suppose. Their worst case scenario for war was Russia being attacked by an alliance of not only Germany and Austria, but also Romania, Sweden, and Japan. And maybe China, too. Being a sprawling empire with thousands of miles of borders has its disadvantages.

But the Russians always saw Germany and Austria as the main threat, hence the fact that most of the railroad construction in Russia was geared toward a quick deployment to the western border. The Russians had a pretty good idea of the German war plan. They had figured that the Germans were preparing first for an offensive against France, with only a weak screening force in East Prussia. So the opportunity to take advantage of this German weakness to make a quick strike into East Prussia is tempting, and more so when you consider how it would help Russia's ally, France, by forcing the Germans to divert resources away from their western offensive.

But Russia also has to consider the Austrian Army. And if Russia has a pretty good idea of German war plans, it has a very good idea of Austrian war plans, thanks to Colonel Redl, as we saw in episode 70. That was just a few months ago, and although the Austrians have been revising their war plan ever since discovering it had leaked, that process was not yet finished, and Austria's plans still closely follow what the Russians had been given. Austria had 65 infantry and cavalry divisions, most of which could be expected to be deployed against Russia. And if you look at a map, you will see that Russian Poland, a region full of coal and industry and restive Poles, juts westward like a thumb into the space between Germany and Austria, meaning that any offensive aimed at the Germans would be vulnerable to an Austrian counteroffensive on its flank, and vice versa. And then there was the threat from Rumania, which was viewed as likely to support Austria and Germany.

Now, the Russian Army of 1914 can mobilize 153 divisions of infantry and cavalry, although even after full mobilization is achieved, some of these soldiers will be needed to garrison Siberia and the Baltic and Black Sea coasts and the Rumanian border and the Caucasus. So that leaves about 107 divisions for action against Germany and Austria.

You might think that the smart move here would be to take advantage of the thin German line in the east by matching it with a thin Russian line, and throwing the bulk of Russia's forces against Austria, which is initially the greater threat. Also, the Austrian army was known to be understrength and poorly equipped, and good Slavic Russians all knew that their brother Slavs, who made up a major portion of Austria's military, would be reluctant to fight them. A lot of Russians expected wholesale mutinies and defections among Austria's Slav soldiers in the event of a war.

The German Army, on the other hand, was well known to be better trained and equipped than the Russian Army. There was also the simple fact that most Russian leaders didn't feel the same kind of grievances against Germany that a decade of Balkan squabbling had created against Austria. Germany still had a lot of goodwill in Russian government circles.

So, attack Austria, right? Well, there's just one problem with that. France. France has been a staunch and loyal ally to the Russian Empire for twenty years now. French loans have financed Russian military modernization. The alliance with France has kept Germany off balance and

forced her to treat Russia with respect. Should Russia now abandon her ally in her hour of need, just because Austria makes a more tempting target?

No. Many in Russian military and government circles felt strongly that Russia had a moral obligation to do everything possible to take the pressure off France. And so, Russia embraced a strategy of dividing its large western force so it could launch simultaneous offensives against Germany and Austria. Specifically, Russia designated 65 divisions to oppose Austria. Now, Austria also has 65 divisions, but it's reasonable to expect that Austria will need a lot of them for other fronts, against Serbia and Montenegro, maybe even against Italy. Against Germany, the Russians would allocate their remaining 42 divisions. The Russians believed this would give them 2:1 superiority over German forces in East Prussia, because the Russians way overestimated German defenses. In fact, for the sake of the Schlieffen Plan and keeping the right wing very strong, the Germans were only putting the equivalent of about ten divisions in the east, relying on these plus a system of fortifications to hold off the Russians for a few weeks. And so, when the Russians attack, they will discover a German line even thinner than they had expected. This will have consequences.

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening. Many of you have asked me about a Patreon page; well, it's now up and running. Check it out at [patreon.com/markpainter](https://patreon.com/markpainter), or you can find a button at the podcast website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com).

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Next weekend is the Independence Day holiday weekend in the US, and I'm still a little behind, so I'm going to have to take a week off there, but I hope you will join me in two weeks' time, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue our survey of Great War military planning by examining the war plans of France and Austria. That's in two weeks, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. There's an irony in the fact that in 1914, the Germans saw themselves as a surrounded and beleaguered nation, on the verge of being overrun by a coalition of powers around her, while those powers saw Germany as dangerously expansionist. The German economy was growing rapidly, and Germany was close to becoming the largest economy in

Europe. She would eventually attain that position anyway, but two world wars would mean it would not happen until the very end of the twentieth century.

One other possible war plan for Germany would have been to take her army, the best in the world, and her not inconsiderable navy, and just hunker down in a defensive posture on all fronts, waiting for her enemies to launch offensives she could then crush, until her exhausted foes were ready to come to the negotiating table. No one in the German General Staff appears to have taken that option seriously. Field Marshal Schlieffen was a renowned expert on the Battle of Cannae, where a numerically smaller attacker had destroyed a larger defending force. History also records engagements in which a numerically smaller *defender* had ground down and defeated a numerically superior attacker, but for some reason, military strategists like Schlieffen never seem to want to study *those* battles.

[music: Closing Theme]