

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 88

“The Miracle on the Marne”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The German advance in the West is continuing. The French are in retreat and their government is preparing to relocate to Bordeaux, an action that would have been unimaginable just a couple of weeks ago.

The Schlieffen Plan is unfolding exactly the way it was supposed to. But the clock is running out. The plan calls for French capitulation within the next two weeks. The French are surely losing. But are they beaten?

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 88. The Miracle on the Marne.

It's the last week of August, and we are back on the Western Front. Before we join the soldiers on the ground, though, let's take a moment to look down on the front from above, as it were, and examine things from a bird's-eye view.

The French line is holding reasonably well on the right flank. This is roughly the Franco-German border from Switzerland in the south to Luxembourg in the north. The French offensive into Alsace and Lorraine failed, and the French have been pushed back onto French soil in some places, but the relatively rough terrain here gives the defenders the advantage, as does the powerful French fortification at Verdun.

But the left flank is another story. Here the French have been retreating for ten days. The imperative to keep the front line continuous, and not allow any gaps that the Germans might exploit to isolate French units, is forcing the Fifth Army, the force at the far left of the line, to retreat more and more to the south. This is opening an ever wider gap between the left end of the French line and the Channel coast, and the gist of the German strategy is growing plainer. The Germans mean to use that gap to circle behind the Fifth Army, surround it, and destroy it. That will leave Paris and the heart of France undefended. The commander of the Fifth Army, General

Charles Lanrezac, is the Cassandra of this tale. He has been trying to sound the alarm over just this possibility since the beginning of the war, but his superior, the commander-in-chief of the French Army, Marshal Joseph Joffre, has repeatedly dismissed his warnings.

As for Joffre himself, his early faith in Plan XVII and *élan* and “offense to the utmost” has proved gravely misplaced. He misjudged the German offensive, then he ordered a French counteroffensive that was something close to a disaster. Some commanders would by this time have been wracked with doubt, with guilt even, and have begun doubting their own instincts. But not Joffre. He might have been *too* confident. He might have had *too* much faith in his own judgment, but right now, the last thing France needs is a commander-in-chief who is paralyzed by doubt.

We tend to think of retreat as synonymous with defeat, and too often overlook the difference between a skillful retreat and a frantic one. Joffre had made mistakes, but his execution of what history calls the Great Retreat was masterful, and his stubborn optimism was a necessary antidote to the despair that was by this time consuming many of France’s other military and civilian leaders.

The French Army was retreating, but it was retreating intact. Joffre was scrupulous about keeping a continuous line to prevent enemy encirclements and bided his time until the new Sixth Army could be organized, and the front line made stable.

It makes for an interesting contrast, to put Joffre’s staunch optimism in the face of repeated setbacks up against the attitude of his counterpart on the other side of the front line, the German Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke. While the rest of the German leadership was convinced that French capitulation was only days away, Moltke was as stubborn in his pessimism as Joffre was in his optimism.

First of all, as the German armies in the west geared up for their final offensive, their numbers were shrinking. The equivalent of two army corps had had to be kept in Belgium to keep the still resisting Belgian Army bottled up at Antwerp and to secure communication and supply lines through Belgium and on to the front. Belgian resistance to Germany’s requisitioning of their country as a forward base for an assault on France has been much, much fiercer than the Germans anticipated, and continues even after German forces have occupied most of the country.

The equivalent of a third army corps had been detached to lay siege to the French fortifications at Maubeuge, which the Germans had bypassed but was still holding out. And as we saw last time, two army corps were redeployed to Germany’s collapsing Eastern Front to hold off the unexpectedly strong Russian offensive there. So although the cornerstone of the Schlieffen Plan was, as Schlieffen himself had put it, to “keep the right wing very strong,” the German right was in fact getting weaker and weaker as it got deeper and deeper into France. To be precise, if you want to do the math, the German right flank offensive has by this time lost five army corps, which is the equivalent of an entire field army.

Second, the German soldiers were getting exhausted. The French and the British were retreating rapidly, keeping up an exhausting pace. The Germans did their best to pursue at a faster pace, hoping to catch up to enemy units and engage them while they were in a disorganized state, but the allies always seemed to manage to stay just out of reach. German soldiers, like the British and French, were getting so fatigued that they were known to fall asleep while marching, which, yes, that is a thing that can happen, if you are tired enough.

Third, Moltke accepted the German military doctrine, which held that winning battles was less important than holding the superior position. You can defeat an enemy and he will still come back for more. The goal is to surround the enemy, cut him off, and eliminate his ability to fight. Everyone else was looking at the maps and seeing the front line sink deeper and deeper into French territory; Moltke was looking at the statistics for French soldiers taken prisoner, and finding them disappointing. The German Army was taking prisoners, yes, but they were not capturing entire French formations, and that was really what the plan was all about.

There was hope that the decisive encirclement could still come, but so far the French and the British have been masterful at keeping their necks out of the noose. One possible solution that Moltke considered was moving some divisions from the German left, the soldiers who had already withstood and broken the French counteroffensive, and redeploying them to the right, where they could help reinforce the offensive. The Germans had by this time gotten wind of Joffre's plan to create a Sixth Army on the German right, and his movement of units from the German left to help build this new force. Logically, you might think that the Germans need to counter that move with a corresponding transfer of their own units from the left to the right. But the German left flank, the Sixth and Seventh Armies, under the command of Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, were seeing success in pushing the French back even in their sector, the roughest terrain on the front. Rupprecht and some on the General Staff were dangling the possibility that he might break through the French right. This would allow the Germans the classic double encirclement, as opposed to the single encirclement the Schlieffen Plan envisioned. A double encirclement as at the Battle of Cannae, so many years ago. Remember how hard von Schlieffen had studied his favorite battle?

At one point, Moltke had gone so far as to inquire of Rupprecht about sending a couple of army corps over to the right flank to aid in the offensive. But as it happened, Kaiser Wilhelm was visiting Rupprecht when the message from Moltke came, and he quashed the idea. Surely Rupprecht would break through the enemy lines any day now.

In fact, the German attempt at an offensive on the left would come to nothing. No one at the time knew it yet, but the front line that ran from the French fortress at Verdun more or less south to the Swiss border had already solidified into the kind of static front line that would be the hallmark of the Western Front for the rest of the war. It is the opposite end of the front, where the French and German flanks are still unanchored and unprotected, where lie the best prospects for a quick German victory.

And speaking of that sector of the front, on the German right the First Army is continuing its exhausting advance, primarily against the British Expeditionary Force. The BEF commander, General Sir John French has given up any thought of success in the field and is now thinking only of getting his force back to Britain. French believed the Germans held a special animosity for the British, and were determined to destroy the BEF at any cost, even the cost of a failed offensive. The British were retreating south and east, angling to get behind the French Fifth Army, slip around Paris to the east, and, once safely behind the lines and disengaged, prepare to evacuate France.

To speed their retreat, the British were tossing off their supply wagons anything they deemed surplus. Extra uniforms, boots, even crates of ammunition. When their German pursuers found these abandoned items lying by the side of the road, they drew the reasonable conclusion that the BEF was a shattered force, no longer capable of resisting the German offensive.

The collapse of the BEF meant that the German First Army was getting out ahead of the Second Army, the one opposite the French Fifth Army. This was exposing the flank of the Fifth Army; it was also putting at risk the Sixth Army that was still forming up to the west of Paris. A continued German advance in that direction would shatter France's last hope of setting up a stable defensive line.

The ever-optimistic Joffre, however, saw an opportunity. If the Germans are moving to the Fifth Army flank, it means the Fifth Army has a shot at the German First Army flank. Joffre ordered the commander of the Fifth Army, General Lanrezac, to turn his army left and strike at the Germans.

Lanrezac, the Cassandra of our story, the man who has been pleading for Joffre to take note of the strong German right ever since the war began, the man who was ignored over and over and proved right over and over, finally snapped. He called the order "almost insane." Obviously, if Lanrezac turned his soldiers left to attack the German First Army, the German Second Army would have a clear shot at his own right flank. He begged Joffre to reconsider. Joffre spent a difficult night thinking hard—about whether to sack Lanrezac.

And by the way, next to the Fifth Army was the British I Corps, commanded by General Sir Douglas Haig. I Corps was in better shape than II Corps, and when Haig got wind of an offensive, he contacted Lanrezac and offered the assistance of his corps. Lanrezac was thrilled. At last, the British were going to help. But when Marshal French, Haig's superior, got wind of what Haig was up to, he ordered Haig to rescind the offer and continue his retreat. Lanrezac famously responded, when he heard the news, "*c'est un félonie!*" "It is a betrayal!"

So as you can imagine, the only person Lanrezac hates more than Joffre right now is Marshal French.

On August 28, Joffre traveled to the front to meet with Lanrezac in person. He found the general looking worn out, disheveled, his eyes bloodshot. Joffre ordered Lanrezac to begin the attack, or else he would be relieved of command. In some accounts, Joffre threatened to have Lanrezac shot. Lanrezac agreed to the offensive, on the condition that the order be given in writing, so sure he was that the attack would be a disaster. Joffre's chief of staff wrote out the order then and there, Joffre signed it, and handed it over to Lanrezac.

Lanrezac carried out the attack on August 29, toward the village of St. Quentin. It failed, just as Lanrezac had anticipated, in part because the Germans had gotten hold of a copy of the plan and knew the attack was coming. Von Bülow's Second Army took advantage of the situation to attack the Fifth Army on its right, just as Lanrezac had also anticipated.

But von Bülow had made a mistake. He assumed, incorrectly, that the defeat at St. Quentin had broken Lanrezac's unit, and this would be an easy mopping up operation from here on out. But Lanrezac and the Fifth Army surprised everyone by pivoting smartly to the right and beating back the Second Army. Because the Germans by this time are exhausted and their ranks getting thinner. The French and British forces opposing the main German offensive now outnumber the Germans. But the Allies do not yet fully grasp the situation. And the fact remains that their own forces are just as exhausted and disorganized. Even the ever-confident Joffre was among those telling the Cabinet that Paris was in danger.

But by August 31, it was becoming clear that the Germans had been bloodied by the Fifth Army, and the Sixth Army was almost ready. Joffre began to hope that the French could end their retreat and these two armies could form a stable line no farther back than the River Marne.

But of course, the BEF held the line between the Fifth and the Sixth Armies, and as long as French kept retreating, the French would be forced to follow him. Joffre pleaded with French to coordinate with the French armies, but the British commander refused, pleading that the BEF was in no shape to face the Germans.

Actually, the condition of the BEF wasn't all that bad. It had more to do with Marshal French's conviction that the French had already lost the war. On August 31, the British War Minister, Lord Kitchener, received a report from French in which the BEF commander told of his conviction that the time had come for the BEF to leave France. Kitchener and the British Cabinet were shocked. Kitchener replied, with remarkable restraint under the circumstances, that he and the government were "surprised" by French's report, and told him to coordinate with the French to the greatest extent possible.

Of course, there's a lot of wiggle room in that order. Military commanders are subordinate to the civilian government, but are usually given the authority to make strictly military judgments on their own. On the other hand, Lord Kitchener is not only the Minister of War; he is also the only officer in the British Army who outranks Sir John.

Kitchener was so anxious to receive French's reply that he waited up until 1:00 in the morning for it, and read the message as it was being decoded. Sir John's message said that the French were constantly retreating on either side of the BEF, and that it was therefore impossible for the British to stand and fight on their own. This was, to put it charitably, a misstatement of the facts. Actually, the French wanted to stand their ground, and it was Sir John who was insisting on retreat.

At 2:30 that morning, Lord Kitchener was leaving London on a special train. When he reached the coast, he boarded a Royal Navy cruiser that Winston Churchill had ordered up for him, and by sunrise, he was in Paris. He met with French at the British Embassy. The French Prime Minister and Minister of War were also present at this meeting. Kitchener appeared in full uniform, to emphasize the fact that he was the only soldier in the British Army who outranked French. The two soldiers retired to a private room. What exactly was said in that private meeting is uncertain, but afterward, Kitchener telegraphed the Cabinet to tell them that the BEF would be holding the line alongside the French Army. Sir John's got a courtesy copy of the telegram, with an accompanying message telling him that he should consider it an "instruction."

This same day, September 1, the German First Army made contact with the newly assembled French Sixth Army, about thirty miles from Paris.

[music: *Fantasia* from *Siegfried*]

The exhausted German First Army had been advancing as rapidly as men on foot can advance for two weeks now. But now, at last, Paris was all but in sight. At their first encounter with the new Sixth Army, the Germans had brushed aside these new, green troops with little difficulty. There was no sign of the BEF, apart from those piles of British boots by the sides of the road. And the French Fifth Army was in retreat once again after their brief attempt to stand their ground. Most significantly, the Fifth Army was retreating south, while Paris was now to the southwest.

To the First Army commander, General von Kluck, the conclusion to be drawn from these facts was obvious. The Fifth Army was allowing a gap to open between its left flank and Paris. And that could only be because there was no meaningful French or British force still standing anywhere to the west of the Fifth Army.

The Schlieffen Plan called for the First Army to continue to march southwest in a broad sweep west of Paris and around, the final encirclement of the French flank. But this would mean a week of more long marches for his exhausted soldiers. Von Kluck felt that the facts on the ground demonstrated this was no longer necessary. The time to take the sweeping turn to the east was now. The Fifth Army was like ripe fruit, just waiting to be plucked.

It was von Kluck's idea to turn to his left for the final blow against the Fifth Army. This wasn't part of the Schlieffen Plan. But remember, German military doctrine gives a lot of discretion to

the commanders in the field. And you'll recall that von Kluck had earlier been under the command of Marshal von Bülow, commander of the Second Army, and he had asked Moltke to be given more discretion. But in this case, even von Bülow agreed. As always, he was concerned that von Kluck's First Army was pulling out too far to the west to give proper coverage to the Second Army flank, so the proposal that Kluck turn east and draw in closer to the Second Army, well, that sounded pretty good to him. And when von Kluck reported his intentions to Moltke, the Chief of Staff also endorsed them, because Moltke could see by this time that the German right was growing thin. Too many units redeployed, too many casualties, not enough replacements. To follow the Schlieffen Plan to the letter now would require the already stretched German line to stretch itself another 50-70 miles to encircle Paris. That would be stretching the German line too much.

So Moltke approved von Kluck's turn to the southeast, but there was a caveat. The First Army must stay on the flank of the Second Army, guarding it from a potential enemy counterattack. Von Kluck was angry. The First Army was more than an escort for the Second Army. This was almost as bad as when he had had to take orders from von Bülow!

On August 31, the order went out for the First Army to turn and march southeast at full speed to cut off the Fifth Army retreat. You can imagine the reaction of the common soldiers, who have been marching without rest now since the fall of Liège, fifteen brutal, exhausting days ago. On September 2, an officer in the First Army wrote, "Our men are done up. They stagger forward, their faces coated with dust, their uniforms in rags...they march with eyes closed, singing in chorus so as not to fall asleep.... Only the certainty of early victory and a triumphal entry into Paris keeps them going.... They drink to excess but this drunkenness keeps them going.... Abnormal stimulants are necessary to combat abnormal fatigue."

This turn did come with a risk. The First Army right flank would be exposed to attack from the south and southwest, the direction of Paris. Von Kluck saw this danger, but considered it manageable. He ordered one of his reserve corps to cover that flank. But by this time, the Germans know full well that the Sixth Army and the BEF were incapable of further resistance. In fact, the First Army had gotten its hands on one of Sir John French defeatist messages, laying out his plan to abandon France.

The First Army's turn means they are turning away from Paris, but of course in the city, no one knows that yet. Remember General Gallieni, who is in charge of defending Paris? Two episodes ago, we saw how hard it was to get Marshal Joffre to commit to providing Gallieni with the three army corps that Gallieni said he would need to do his job. Well now, at last, Joffre is ready to make good on that promise, and provide the Military Governor of Paris with some military to protect Paris with. Basically, he got what was left of the Sixth Army, which was about six divisions, including the two divisions that Joffre had taken out of Paris a few days ago and incorporated into the Sixth Army. Joffre supplemented this force with a corps from the Third Army, over near Verdun.

By the way, did you notice how he did that? Pretty slick, huh? The Germans were having much more difficulty moving units from one point on the front to the other. That's because the Germans have the outside of the curve and were moving soldiers and equipment on roads and rails that had been subjected to heavy bombardment as the French had retreated. The French had the interior of the curved front, and the luxury of using roads and rail lines that hadn't been shelled yet.

With the Sixth Army now garrisoning Paris, Joffre ordered the Fifth Army to fall back to the Seine, where Paris could guard its left flank. The Seine was to be where the French would end the retreat and make their stand.

But on September 2, as the French government was packing up and leaving Paris for Bordeaux, word came from the Fifth Army intelligence officer that the French had found maps in the possession of a dead German cavalry officer. Yes, now it was the French's turn to get lucky with captured documents. These maps showed that the First Army line of march was now directed to the southeast. But it was not yet clear what exactly von Kluck was up to, and so the evacuation of the government proceeded as planned.

That same day, the BEF reached the Marne. They would cross the following day. British soldiers discovered to their consternation that they had marched clean off the southern edge of their maps.

That next day, September 3, as rumors flew that Paris was to be declared an open city, Gallieni released a proclamation that read, simply, "The members of the Government of the Republic have left Paris to give a new impulse to the national defense. I have received a mandate to defend Paris against the invader. This mandate I shall carry out to the end. Gallieni."

It was not until this day that Gallieni was informed of the map that the French intelligence officer had found. Aerial reconnaissance, a new weapon in this new kind of war, was today confirming the story the map told. The German First Army was indeed marching toward the southeast passing Paris by. Two of Gallieni's staff officers mapped out what British and French aviators were reporting, and told Gallieni, "They offer us their flank!"

The German First Army reached the Marne on the evening of September 3, arriving at the river just hours after the French Fifth Army and the BEF had crossed it. The allied retreat was too hasty and too disorganized to properly blow up the bridges across the Marne. By sunset, the Germans held some of them, and von Kluck ordered the First Army to cross the Marne and pursue the enemy at first light the next morning.

This order contradicted the order von Kluck had received from Moltke yesterday. Moltke had ordered the First Army to stay on the Second Army flank. But von Kluck didn't want to waste the opportunity that had been handed to him in the form of these intact bridges. He sent a message to Moltke, who was at the German Army headquarters, now located in Luxembourg.

Von Kluck reported that he was exercising his discretion as a field commander and continuing the advance. Crucially, because of the difficulties the Germans had keeping the telegraph lines open to the front, this message would take a full day to arrive. By the time Moltke found out what von Kluck was up to, the First Army was already across the Marne and two days' march ahead of the Second Army, not to mention ahead of his supply lines and even his own artillery. No matter. Von Kluck didn't think of this advance as going into battle; rather, it was the final roundup of an already defeated enemy.

That same evening, September 3, Gallieni and his staff were huddling in Paris, discussing the pros and cons of taking the army now redeploying into Paris out into the field and attacking the vulnerable German flank.

There's an amusing irony here. Gallieni had been begging Joffre to detach troops from the front to garrison Paris, and Joffre had resisted, seeing the defense of Paris as a lower priority than keeping the field armies intact. Now that Joffre has finally handed over the Sixth Army to Gallieni, Gallieni is requesting permission to march them out of Paris and attack the Germans.

The Sixth Army was barely in a condition to launch such an offensive. They had just straggled back into Paris after their defeat at the hands of von Kluck. Some of these soldiers marched over forty miles in one day—I should say, one day and most of the night—to reach the safety of the capital.

Meanwhile, Marshal Joffre was screwing up his courage. The commander of the Fifth Army, Charles Lanrezac, was increasingly difficult to work with. Lanrezac had anticipated the German offensive, he had fought well, he had managed a grueling retreat and was single-handedly responsible for saving the Fifth Army from destruction, and probably France along with it. But he was also growing increasingly morose and testy, arguing with other officers, questioning orders, and worst of all, dissing Joffre. Lanrezac's relationship with Sir John French was beyond repair; he regarded French as something close to a traitor.

And so Joffre relieved Lanrezac of his command of the Fifth Army on September 3. Whether it was because Lanrezac was too exhausted to carry on, or whether his criticisms of Joffre's orders had been right once too often, that's a matter you can debate. It might well have been both factors.

September 4 was M-35 on the German mobilization schedule. According to the Schlieffen Plan, German soldiers should be marching into Paris any time now. Excitement was rippling though the German military and the government. Even the US ambassador in Berlin felt it. "I am sure there is something big in the air," he remarked.

Only Moltke remained stubbornly pessimistic. On September 4, he said, "We have had success, but not victory. Victory means the annihilation of the enemy's power of resistance. When a million men oppose each other in battle, the victor has prisoners. Where are our prisoners?"

Twenty thousand in Lorraine, perhaps another ten or twenty thousand altogether. And from the comparatively small number of guns captured, it seems to me the French are conducting a planned and orderly retreat.”

And some disturbing intelligence was coming across Moltke’s desk. Prince Rupprecht reported that two French army corps seemed to have withdrawn from his front. Other information suggested an unusual amount of train traffic in and out of Paris. Moltke put two and two together and realized the French were successfully redeploying those two army corps into the path of the German offensive. That was bad news. Worse news was that an army still capable of such a swift and significant redeployment is an army not yet beaten. Worst of all, the message from Kluck finally came in, the one in which he reported that he was disregarding Moltke’s instructions and advancing across the Marne.

That evening, Moltke issued an order in which he suggested, correctly, that the French were massing in Paris. He told the First and Second Armies to halt their advances and turn toward Paris. The Third Army was ordered to march for the Seine east of Paris. The Kaiser’s ministers were baffled by Moltke’s seeming descent into panic on the very cusp of victory. The German war minister, General Erich von Falkenhayn, wrote in his diary on September 5, “Moltke’s wits come to an end.”

Actually, Moltke was exactly right, both in his analysis and in his order. But it came too late. The Sixth Army was already on the move.

[music: *Fantasia* from *Siegfried*]

Gallieni’s impulse to attack the German flank was based upon no more analysis than simply the fact that Kluck’s army had turned and presented a vulnerable flank. Joffre, on the other hand, had to look at the big picture. He could not approve Gallieni’s proposed attack unless it was supported by attacks from the Fifth Army and from the BEF. Without that support, the Germans would likely just turn on the Sixth Army once again, and this time probably destroy it.

The new commander of the Fifth Army, General Louis Franchet d’Espèrey, was on his way to a meeting with the commanders of the BEF, in the hope of smoothing over the hard feelings left from Lanrezac’s command, when he received the telegram from Joffre, asking whether the Fifth Army could attack in coordination with the Sixth. He met with Henry Wilson, Sir John French not being present. Franchet d’Espèrey pulled out Joffre’s telegram and said, “You are our ally. I shall keep no secrets from you.” He read the telegram aloud and told Wilson his own reply to Joffre would be that the Fifth Army was ready to attack. “I hope you will not oblige us to do it alone. It is essential that you fill the space between the Fifth and Sixth Armies.” Wilson agreed, but warned that convincing Sir John was going to be a problem.

At almost exactly the same moment Moltke issued his order to the German right flank to turn toward Paris, Joffre issued his order launching the offensive.

On the morning of September 5, Kluck had the First Army on its feet and advancing southeast before the order from Moltke came in. Kluck disregarded it and continued the advance, judging the threat from the direction of Paris to be insignificant. But, perhaps expecting this, Moltke sent his intelligence chief on the 175-mile drive from Luxembourg to Kluck's headquarters. He arrived late in the day to explain to Kluck in detail the basis of Moltke's order. Kluck agreed then, reluctantly, to draw the First Army back behind the Marne, giving up the territory they had claimed in the past two days. Both men agreed there was no hurry. The French were still preparing their attack. In fact, the Sixth Army was already making first contact with that reserve corps that Kluck had left to guard his flank, although he himself had not yet gotten the news.

Meanwhile, Sir John French returned to BEF headquarters and, when he heard of Joffre's latest plan, refused to participate. He ordered that the BEF retreat continue. Joffre traveled in person over the 115 miles to the BEF headquarters to make his plea to Sir John in person. This was the supreme moment, Joffre told him. The entire French Army was about to be thrown into the final battle to save France. The lives of the French people, the soil of France, the future of Europe, all hung in the balance. The honor of England is at stake. I cannot believe the British Army would refuse to do its share. He concluded with "*c'est la France qui vous supplie.*" "It is France herself that begs you."

French's eyes filled with tears. He replied in his characteristically incomprehensible French. Seeing that Joffre could not understand him, French turned to Wilson to translate and said, "Damn it, I can't explain. Tell him we will do all we possibly can."

Joffre returned to his headquarters. At about the same time Kluck and Moltke's intelligence chief were assuring each other that the danger was not imminent, Joffre was telling his staff, "Gentlemen, we will fight on the Marne."

The next day, as word came in of the attack by the Sixth Army from the direction of Paris, Kluck turned the First Army back to the southwest, to meet the enemy. But in so doing, he opened up a fatal hole between the First and Second Armies, just where the French Fifth Army and the BEF were beginning their own attack. Kluck's First Army pressed on, still hoping to break the Sixth Army and advance into Paris.

The following day, September 7, came the signal moment of what would come to be called the Battle of the Marne. Gallieni commissioned Paris's 600 taxicabs to shuttle soldiers to the front line. Each cab carried five soldiers and made two trips over the 50-kilometer drive to the front line, depositing the better part of an infantry division at a key location in the battle.

These taxicabs would become legendary. They did not win the Battle of the Marne by themselves. Many other soldiers and equipment were carried at the same time by truck and train. But the rapid movement of so many soldiers over so much ground presages what the warfare of the future is going to look like. And the symbolic significance of the taxis can't be understated.

At a moment when it looked as if Paris might fall, it represented how every sector of French society was doing its part to save the Republic.

The French Fifth Army attacked the flank of the German Second Army the next day, driving it back. And the British Expeditionary Force drove into the flank of the First Army. Both armies were in danger of becoming surrounded. On September 9, the order was given for both forces to withdraw to the north, behind the River Aisne. Paris had been saved. Legend has it that very day Moltke reported to Kaiser Wilhelm, „*Majestät, wir haben den Krieg verloren*,“ That is, “Majesty, we have lost the war.” Moltke would soon be replaced by Falkenhayn as chief of staff. His health never recovered, and he passed away in 1916, at the age of 68.

Why did the Schlieffen Plan fail? After the end of the war, there was a virtual cottage industry in Germany of people looking for someone to blame for the disaster. One popular theory that emerged was that Moltke had mismanaged the Schlieffen Plan. In this view, the Schlieffen Plan was a finished masterpiece that would have succeeded brilliantly, had only Moltke stuck to it more closely.

The truth is, no military plan is a finished masterpiece. Plans can and must change according to the flow of battle. And the German military in particular placed an emphasis on granting field commanders broad latitude, something that is usually regarded as a strength, not a weakness, in the German Army.

The Schlieffen Plan was complex, ambitious, and groundbreaking. But those facts alone don't guarantee victory. The plan was too risky to gamble the future of the German Empire upon, but that's exactly what the Kaiser and his government have done. A strong argument can be made that a defensive posture in the West and a better-coordinated effort with Austria to defeat Russia in the East may have served Germany better, rather than focusing on France and leaving the Austrians to take up the war in the East alone, which they were plainly incapable of doing.

The Schlieffen Plan's tin ear for diplomatic and political considerations made it easy to paint Germany as the aggressor, after it invaded and occupied two innocent neutrals, Luxembourg and Belgium, and then launched a ferocious offensive aimed at crushing France. The failure of this gamble not only cost Germany the war, but it is part of the explanation for the harsh peace terms imposed upon her.

And then there was the simple fact that resistance, both in Belgium and in France, was far stronger than the Germans expected. As General Kluck himself would say later, “That men will let themselves be killed where they stand, that is well known and counted on in every plan of battle. But that men who have retreated for ten days, sleeping on the ground and half dead with fatigue, should be able to take up their rifles and attack when the bugle sounds, is a thing upon which we never counted.”

We'll have to stop there for today. Thanks for listening, and thank you to listener Dave for becoming a patron of the podcast. Patrons help keep the podcast going, and so do people who like or comment or tweet or leave a rating and review at the iTunes store. If you like *The History of the Twentieth Century*, those are the things you can do to help keep it going.

With this episode we come to the end of the initial German offensive in the West. We also come to the second anniversary of the podcast. Two years down, and...well, let's not speculate how many years to go. We've covered most of the opening moves of the war now, except for the Austro-Russian front and the naval war. These will be episodes 90 and 91, respectively, but before we go there, I want to take a little break from the war and turn our attention to the United States, the most powerful and influential country in the world *not* involved in the Great War.

So I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we get caught up on the doings of President Wilson and Vice President Marshall and consider that the mere fact that the United States is not a declared combatant in the Great War does not mean she is not affected by the Great War. Quite the contrary. What this country needs is A Good Five-Cent Cigar, next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The Paris taxi drivers who transported those soldiers to the Battle of the Marne were fully imbued with the proper patriotic spirit. But they also kept their meters running. And the French government paid full fare for every one of those 1,200 trips, a total cost close to £70,000. In today's currency, that's a little less than a million US dollars.

[music: Closing War Theme]