

**GREAT WAR  
(1914-1918):  
GERMANY'S PLAN TO  
WIN: THE SCHLIEFFEN  
PLAN**



# **GREAT WAR (1914-1918): GERMANY'S PLAN TO WIN: THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN**

## **Description**

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the different parts of the Schlieffen Plan, how the plan as a whole was supposed to prevent a two-front war, why the plan's failure by September 1914 spelled doom for the German war effort, leading to four years of horror on the Western Front.

## **Subjects**

European History, World History

## **Grade Level**

11-12

## **Duration**

90 minutes

## **Tour Links**

- Invalids' Cemetery, Berlin
- Museum of the Great War, Péronne, France

## **Essential Questions**

- Who was Alfred Schlieffen?
- What were the basic provisions of the "Schlieffen Plan"? Why did Schlieffen believe his plan necessary for Germany to win any general war in Europe?
- Why was Schlieffen worried about a two-front war?
- How close did the German Army come to implementing the Schlieffen Plan in 1914? Why was it ultimately unsuccessful?

## Academic Summary

In the event of a war with Germany, France will probably restrict itself to defensive measures, especially since it cannot count on effective support from Russia.

France has been preparing a military line for this purpose for quite some time, one that is to a great extent permanently fortified and whose main bases include the fortresses of Belfort, Epinal, Toul, and Verdun. This line can be adequately manned by France's large army and will be extremely difficult to attack.

An attack will not be directed against the large fortresses since victory there would require a massive siege army and a great deal of effort and time, even more so because the fortresses cannot be encircled and the attackers can only lay siege from one side...

To achieve this, the Germans must take control of the Belgian-French border on the left bank of the Meuse, along with the fortified positions at Mézières, Hirson, and Maubeuge, three small defensive forts, as well as Lille and Dunkirk. To advance this far, they will have to violate the neutrality of Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The violation of Luxembourg's neutrality will have no significant consequences other than protests. From the Dutch perspective, an England that is allied with France is no less an enemy than is Germany. It will be possible to negotiate a treaty with them...

[For the development of the entire operation] it is crucial to create a powerful right wing, to win the battles with its support, to engage in continuous pursuit of the enemy, and to cause him to give up ground, again and again, with this strong flank.

The right wing can only be fortified at the expense of the left, which will probably then have to fight a superior enemy.

A tremendous effort is required of the right wing if it is to achieve success. Yet the roads that will be used are generally very good. There would even be sufficient quarters in numerous towns if the corps comprising the right wing were not required to march in such large number that even the most densely populated areas are unable to provide sufficient quarters.

*From The "Schlieffen Memorandum" of 1905*

When you march into France, let the last man on the right brush the Channel with his sleeve.

*Saying attributed to Alfred von Schlieffen*

Paris for Lunch. Dinner in St. Petersburg!

*Quotation attributed to Kaiser William II in 1914*

... Russia, without waiting for any result, proceeded to a general mobilization of her forces both on land and sea. In consequence of this threatening step, which was not justified by any military proceedings on the part of Germany, the German Empire was faced by a grave and imminent danger. If the German Government had failed to guard against this peril, they would have

compromised the safety and the very existence of Germany. The German Government were, therefore, obliged to make representations to the Government of His Majesty the Emperor of All the Russias and to insist upon a cessation of the aforesaid military acts. Russia having refused to comply with this demand, and having shown by this refusal [this attitude]\* that her action was directed against Germany, I have the honor, on the instructions of my Government, to inform your Excellency as follows:

His Majesty the Emperor, my august Sovereign, in the name of the German Empire, accepts the challenge, and considers himself at war with Russia.  
*German Declaration of War on Russia, delivered by the German Ambassador to St. Petersburg, 01 Aug 1914*

M. Le President,

The German administrative and military authorities have established a certain number of flagrantly hostile acts committed on German territory by French military aviators.

Several of these have openly violated the neutrality of Belgium by flying over the territory of that country; one has attempted to destroy buildings near Wesel; others have been seen in the district of the Eifel; one has thrown bombs on the railway near Karlsruhe and Nuremberg.

I am instructed, and I have the honor to inform your Excellency, that in the presence of these acts of aggression the German Empire considers itself in a state of war with France in consequence of the acts of this latter Power.

*German Declaration of War on France, delivered by the German Ambassador to St. Paris, 04 Aug 1914*

In the early morning hours of 04 Aug 1914, in a small quiet section of Belgium on the German border, six brigades of the German Imperial Army crossed the border and headed for Leige, a city ringed with forts a few miles from the border. These were the vanguard units of the larger German force. Massed on the German side of the border for weeks, divisions of the Imperial Army waited in anticipation for the word from headquarters.

Most Germans thought the war would be over before Christmas that year. The German High Command had been planning the attack for decades, ever since the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Belgium wasn't the real target. France was. German strategists and military advisors had assumed that as soon as war was declared, the French Army would move against Alsace-Lorraine, two provinces the French believed had been "stolen" in 1871. The German high command believed this strategy would leave Paris lightly defended.

Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the Imperial German General Staff from 1871 to 1906, had developed a plan of attack (that subsequently bore his name) in anticipation for such a moment. After the Franco-Russian Alliance of 1894, the probability of Germany facing a two-front war grew exponentially. France was Germany's traditional enemy. Russia had designs on dominating Eastern Europe. The question for Schlieffen in planning for such an eventuality was how to mobilize the German army in such a way

as to effectively fight both sides (or to avoid doing so). Schlieffen knew that the Russians could put a much larger army into the field than Imperial Germany could. He also surmised that Austria-Hungary (Germany's ally and Russia's enemy) wouldn't be much help.

The "Schlieffen Plan", as articulated in a memorandum to the German High Command in 1905, called for a three part strategy. First, anticipating a six-week timeframe before the Russian Army would be fully mobilized and ready to invade Eastern Germany (mostly due to outdated and antiquated transportation networks across the Russian Empire), Schlieffen called for a holding action by German armies on the eastern front. This engagement would allow most of the German troops to be shifted to the Western Front (with troops carried on superior German transportation networks). Second, since the French would throw everything into taking Alsace and Lorraine, the German Army would pull back to positions towards the Rhine that allowed the French to (slowly) capture territory the Germans considered almost worthless. This strategy would preoccupy the French while the Germans drove in behind them to capture Paris. This final part of the plan was how Schlieffen believed Germany could win the war. German troops would immediately cross into Belgium when the war began, an action that would inevitably bring the British into the war in defense of Belgium's neutrality. Schlieffen believed, however, that the war in France would be over quickly before the British Expeditionary Force could arrive on the continent, and that London would then sue for peace after realizing that she was alone on the Western Front. Schlieffen called for a massive drive through Belgium in a wheel movement which he called the "Right Wing" of the German Army, with the outer divisions of the drive reaching the North Sea. The army would then turn south towards Paris, encircling the capital and surrounding the French Army in a pincer movement. Schlieffen believed the French would quickly surrender when the Army's morale was gone. With the war finished on the Western Front, Schlieffen could then shift his troops to the east, where superior soldiers and weapons would win the day against the Czar's poorly trained, poorly equipped and poorly led troops.

Perhaps luckily for Schlieffen, he died in 1913, and the old General never lived to see how his own subordinates foiled the plan that bears his name. When the invasion came in Aug 1914, they failed to commit enough troops to Schlieffen's "right wing." The German army therefore had to cut off its invasion and it turned south too quickly, short of the North Sea (leaving room for the BEF to fight in Belgium). The French Army, after a series of defeats, miraculously rallied around General Joffre at the First Battle of the Marne and held the Germans out of Paris. Finally, the Russians were able to muster enough troops to threaten the German Eastern Front (at least the Germans believed it was threatened), and German High Command shifted soldiers to the east too early. By October, the war had settled down into a stalemate that would, over the next four years, bring the horrors of trench warfare, gas attacks and despair unlike any seen up to that point in human history. Schlieffen's plan in theory was sound, and it would be the basis for the German plan of attack in 1939-40, but in 1914 it was a failure.

Through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the different parts of the Schlieffen Plan, how the plan as a whole was supposed to prevent a two-front war, why

the plan's failure by September 1914 spelled doom for the German war effort, leading to four years of horror on the Western Front.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the plan developed by German Imperial Chief of Staff Count Alfred von Schlieffen for winning a two-front war against France and Russia.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why Schlieffen's subordinates modified the plan after his retirement, and why those modifications ended up causing the plan itself to fail.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how mistakes made in August 1914 by the Imperial German High Command led to the failure of the "Schlieffen Plan."
4. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the unexpected moves by the French Army and the Russian Army that ultimately doomed the Schlieffen Plan, leading to a stalemate on the Western Front.

## Procedure

### I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What dangers did Germany face from the "two-front" war? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of the Schlieffen Plan and why it ultimately failed. (20 min)
- Video – Schlieffen Plan (40 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles on the Schlieffen Plan and its failure in 1914, taking notes as appropriate. (10 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles/ photographs to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was Schlieffen's plan for winning a two-front war? Why was his plan ultimately unsuccessful when war came in 1914? (10 min)

### III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the Schlieffen Plan, why it was developed, how it was ultimately changed by Schlieffen's subordinates and why its failure in 1914 led to the statement of trench warfare on the Western Front.
- Homework – Thinking back, theorize how the Schlieffen Plan might have been successful.

## **Extension**

### **On tour: Verdun Battlefield Museum and the Douaumont Ossuary**

While on tour in France, students can visit the Verdun Battlefield Museum and the Douaumont Ossuary (on the battlefield), where they can see for themselves the devastation and human costs of war. A solemn place, the Douaumont Ossuary itself contains over 130,000 unidentified French and German soldiers. They are “buried” in the alcoves, and the remains can be seen through small outside windows. Outside of the Ossuary, the cemetery contains thousands more identified soldiers. After the “Hell of Verdun”, it is a wonder why the sides decided to go at it again a generation later in an even more destructive war.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=796](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=796)  
The Schlieffen Plan 1905 (Primary Source)
- [www.3dhistory.co.uk/fact-sheet/029-schlieffen-plan.php](http://www.3dhistory.co.uk/fact-sheet/029-schlieffen-plan.php)  
The Schlieffen Plan (website) – from 3-D history (UK)
- [www.firstworldwar.com/bio/schlieffen.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/bio/schlieffen.htm)  
Who's Who: Alfred von Schlieffen – website article from First World War (UK)
- [www.historylearningsite.co.uk/schlieffen\\_plan.htm](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/schlieffen_plan.htm)  
The Schlieffen Plan (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- [www.historyofwar.org/articles/concepts\\_schlieffen.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/concepts_schlieffen.html)  
Schlieffen Plan 1905 (website) – from the History of War website
- [section117.tylerparker.ca/?p=77](http://section117.tylerparker.ca/?p=77)  
Why the Schlieffen Plan failed (website)
- [mentalfloss.com/article/32120/world-war-i-centennial-schlieffen-dead-his-plan-lives](http://mentalfloss.com/article/32120/world-war-i-centennial-schlieffen-dead-his-plan-lives)  
World War I Centennial: Schlieffen is Dead, but His Plan Lives On (website)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- [mrsthomsenworld.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/the-schlieffen-plan.ppt](http://mrsthomsenworld.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/the-schlieffen-plan.ppt)  
The Schlieffen Plan (PowerPoint)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJXAcI8D51Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJXAcI8D51Y)  
The Failure of the Schlieffen Plan (video) – from BBC Two
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMRISRRj0FI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMRISRRj0FI)  
Schlieffen Plan (video) – 2-minute overview of the Schlieffen Plan
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0kvczF1p04](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0kvczF1p04)  
World War I: Schlieffen Plan (video). Outstanding 4 part video (40 minutes total) about the opening of war, the plans of the German High Command and why those plans ultimately failed – highly recommended for classes that can handle a 40-minute video.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred\\_von\\_Schlieffen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_von_Schlieffen)  
Alfred von Schlieffen – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlieffen\\_Plan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlieffen_Plan)  
Schlieffen Plan – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_invasion\\_of\\_Belgium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_invasion_of_Belgium)  
German Invasion of Belgium – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty\\_of\\_London\\_\(1839\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Treaty_of_London_(1839))  
Treaty of London 1839 – Wikipedia article



- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/germany/country\\_profile](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/germany/country_profile)  
On the Road: Germany (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/austria/great-war-austrian-ultimatum-to-serbia)  
Great War – Serbian Front: Austrian Ultimatum of 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-causes-of-the-war-1914)  
Great War – Lights Going Out in 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-wilfred-owen)  
England and the Great War – Wilfred Owen: Dulce et Decorum Est
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/england-and-the-great-war-armistice-day-1918)  
England and the Great War – Armistice Day 1918
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-treaty-of-versailles)  
Great War – Treaty of Versailles 1919
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-battle-of-the-somme)  
Great War – Battle of the Somme 1916
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-clemenceau-views-at-versailles)  
Great War – France: Clemenceau
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/battle-of-verdun-1916)  
Great War – Battle of Verdun
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/great-war-first-battle-of-the-marne-1914)  
Great War – First Battle of the Marne 1914
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/germany/great-war-schlieffen-plan)  
Great War – Germany: The Schlieffen Plan
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/russia/great-war-eastern-front-treaty-of-brest-litovsk-1918)  
Great War – Eastern Front: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918

### **Key Terms**

- Flanking maneuver
- Great War
- Schlieffen Plan
- Two-front war

