

EFFECTS OF DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION ON THE GERMAN ARMY DURING
THE MARNE CAMPAIGN OF 1914

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE
Art of War Scholars

by

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2014-02

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved</i> OMB No. 0704-0188		
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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 12-12-2014		2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis		3. DATES COVERED (From - To) FEB 2014 – DEC 2014	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Effects of Decentralized Execution on the Germany Army during the Marne Campaign of 1914			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJ Robert C. Schuette			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301			8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT The German Army developed the concept of decentralized execution known as <i>Auftragstaktik</i> between the Wars of Unification and World War I. This concept evolved within the German Army command culture that included the culture of attack and the importance of the general staff officer. <i>Auftragstaktik</i> enabled the German Army to more effectively react to the rapidly changing conditions of the modern battlefield. This increased effectiveness would be achieved through the use of mission-type orders that provided subordinates with the purpose and intent of the mission. It required the subordinate to determine the best way to execute the mission and entrusted him to make decisions within disciplined initiative due to changing situations on the battlefield. With these concepts in place, the army developed plans in the event of war to enable a quick, decisive victory over France in the west before turning to the east to fight Russia. As the war began, the German Army enacted its war plan. In executing the Marne Campaign, the German Army failed to effectively conduct decentralized execution due to key leader appointment, span of control issues, lack of clarity in purpose of orders, communications technology, lack of situational understanding, and the culture of attack.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS Germany Army, Marne Campaign, Battle of the Marne, Auftragstaktik, command culture, decentralized operations					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			19b. PHONE NUMBER (include area code)
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	89	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

EFFECTS OF DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION OF THE GERMAN ARMY DURING THE MARNE CAMPAIGN OF 1914, BY MAJ Robert C. Schuette, 89 pages.

The German Army developed the concept of decentralized execution known as *Auftragstaktik* between the Wars of Unification and World War I. This concept evolved within the German Army command culture that included the culture of attack and the importance of the general staff officer. *Auftragstaktik* enabled the German Army to more effectively react to the rapidly changing conditions of the modern battlefield. This increased effectiveness would be achieved through the use of mission-type orders that provided subordinates with the purpose and intent of the mission. It required the subordinate to determine the best way to execute the mission and entrusted him to make decisions within disciplined initiative due to changing situations on the battlefield. With these concepts in place, the army developed plans in the event of war to enable a quick, decisive victory over France in the west before turning to the east to fight Russia. As the war began, the German Army enacted its war plan. In executing the Marne Campaign, the German Army failed to effectively conduct decentralized execution due to key leader appointment, span of control issues, lack of clarity in purpose of orders, communications technology, lack of situational understanding, and the culture of attack.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Scott Stephenson, LTC Mark Bailey, Mr. Bob Salvatorelli. Their quick, honest feedback guided me throughout the thesis process. Their mentoring has developed me more than they will ever know. I would also like to thank Dr Dean Nowowiejski and my Art of War scholar peers. Dr. Nowowiejski's focus on long term development of officers is a model for any instructor to follow. My Art of War scholar peers provided frank, encouraging feedback at all times.

I would also like to thank Dr Robert J Smith, the director of the Cavalry and Fort Riley museums, along with his staff. Their assistance helped me to find invaluable sources. I appreciate Dr Smith's amazing generosity allowing me to sign out materials from the Fort Riley archive that most would not allow to leave their sight.

This work would be much less complete without the assistance of Mrs Kathy Buker and the rest of the Combined Arms Research Library archive staff. They graciously allowed me to examine precious documents in the Fort Leavenworth Archive that in my research. Without their help, this thesis would be much less complete.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Schera. She made the incredible decision to put my career above hers by bravely leaving the United States Air Force to be with me. I will never forget her sacrifice and love her all the more for it. I never would have finished this project without her love and encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE THESIS APPROVAL PAGE	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
ILLUSTRATIONS	viii
CHAPTER 1 OVERVIEW	1
CHAPTER 2 GERMAN ARMY CULTURE AND THE RISE OF <i>AUFTRAGSTAKTIK</i>	9
German Army Culture	9
Evolution of the General Staff	14
Normaltaktik versus Auftragstaktik	18
Doctrine	24
CHAPTER 3 GERMAN ARMY WAR PLANNING	27
War Planning Prior to Schlieffen	28
The Schlieffen Plan	30
Development of Deployment Plan 1914/15	34
CHAPTER 4 EXECUTION OF THE MARNE CAMPAIGN	42
Bülow in Command of the Right Wing	43
1st Army Turns East of Paris	48
Gap between 1st and 2nd Armies	53
Lieutenant Colonel Hentsch calls off the attack	61
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION	67
Key Leader Appointment	68
Span of Control	69
Clarity of Purpose in Orders	70
Communication Technology	71
Situational Understanding	73
Culture of Attack	74

Adjustment.....	75
Summary.....	76
GLOSSARY	78
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79

ILLUSTRATIONS

	Page
Figure 1. Deployment Plan of 1914/15	38
Figure 2. 1st Army change of direction 31 August	51
Figure 3. Overlap of 1st and 2nd Armies	56
Figure 4. The gap between 1st and 2nd Armies	59

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

At the outset of World War I, the Imperial German Army attempted to win the war through a quick, decisive attack against the French and British in the west before a planned shift of forces to the east to fight Russia. How did the German army of 1914 fail to gain such a victory? Could the German army's command culture, including the concept of decentralized execution, have contributed to the failure of the operation? Decentralized execution, known commonly in the United States Army as *Auftragstaktik*, or the preferred term German army prefers *Führen mit Auftrag*, or "leading with mission" focused on allowing the subordinates maximum flexibility to determine how to execute their assigned missions and adjust to changing situations quickly.¹ Did *Auftragstaktik* bring the German war plan of 1914 as far as possible to success or did it actually contribute to the failure of the Marne Campaign?

This thesis will explore the successes and failures of decentralized execution within the Imperial German Army in the Marne Campaign at the outbreak of World War I. To delve within the concept and execution of the concept, it will first examine the birth of decentralized execution, specifically in the German Army. Next, it will evaluate the German war plan leading up to World War I and how that plan encouraged or discouraged decentralized execution. Then, the thesis will examine some vital decisions

¹ Klaus-Peter Lohmann, "Führen mit Auftrag--Mission Command," *Armor Magazine* 116, no. 6 (November-December 2007). Although many officers within the German army prefer the term *Führen mit Auftrag*, this thesis exclusively uses the term *Auftragstaktik* due to the United States Army officer being the most likely audience for this thesis.

during the execution of the campaign to determine their effects. Last, this thesis will analyze the overall performance of decentralized execution and determine if it aided or hindered the success of the German Army in the Marne Campaign.

During and after the German Wars of Unification, the German Army developed and implemented the concept of decentralized execution. The German Army referred to this concept as *Auftragstaktik*. *Auftragstaktik* focused on using mission type orders to convey the intent of the mission and enabling subordinates to determine how best to accomplish their missions and adjust their courses of action to changing situations.² By empowering the subordinate units to determine how best to accomplish the mission and adjust as the situation changed, the German Army decreased the time needed to react to the situation on the battlefield. The United States military defines decentralized execution as “delegation of execution authority to subordinate commanders.”³

Why would an army use decentralized execution rather than trust its more experienced senior commanders to make the tough decisions? The operational environment drove the need for lower unit commanders to have the ability to make important decisions themselves. As the size of armies and battlefields grew, the commanders could no longer see their entire formation. As a result, higher unit commanders needed to rely solely on the reports of their subordinates to understand the situation. Often the subordinate commander did not have the time to stop and ask for

² Antulio J. Echevarria II, *After Clausewitz* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 38-42.

³ U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2010, amended 15 August 2014), 66.

guidance from his higher headquarters when the situation changed. The higher headquarters needed to provide the necessary guidance before the mission began and trust its subordinate leaders to operate within that guidance.

The German Army did not develop *Auftragstaktik* in a vacuum. It developed within the German Army command culture over time. Jörg Muth defined command culture as:

how an officer considers himself to be in command, i.e., does he command as a visible person close to the action or rather through orders by his staff from his command post. It also means the way an officer tackles the turmoil and chaos of battle and war—whether he tries to make sense of it by doctrine or rather utilizes the pandemonium to make bold moves.⁴

This definition focused only on the decisions of the individual and may not adequately define the command culture of the army within which an officer finds him or herself. Muth's definition only dealt with the placement of the commanders and their comfort with uncertainty. In this document the term “command culture” refers to the institutional environment within which a commander operates and the accepted norms wherein the commander makes decisions.

The German command culture of *Auftragstaktik* allowed subordinate commanders significant leeway in which to execute their missions. It also required the subordinate unit to constantly evaluate whether or not he needed to change his mission, possibly in defiance of orders, to accomplish the goals of his higher headquarters. If situations changed, commanders had the ability to change their own mission. When properly executed, units were able to respond incredibly quickly to changes in the situation.

⁴ Jörg Muth, *Command Culture* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2011), 8.

However, a drawback lurked within the culture. With leaders at every level able to change their own mission based off the situation, how could commanders gain unity of effort? Unless all of his or her forces reacted in the same way to the changed situation, negative rather than positive results may occur. Possible negative outcomes could include desynchronization of the operation, loss of massing effects, and confusion of friendly element locations increasing the chance of fratricide.

The German army solved many of these concerns through its command culture. The command culture of the German army extended far beyond the idea of flexibility in operations. The decentralization of execution existed in an environment of aggressive offense with minimal guidance from superior elements within an organization that put a large emphasis on the role of the General Staff officer. For hundreds of years, the German army culture encouraged leaders to aggressively attack the enemy.⁵ As soon as the enemy could be located, the commander would attack, even if his forces were outnumbered. All of the adjacent commanders would then maneuver in support of the attacking unit. Due to the aggressive nature of their army, German commanders knew exactly what the adjacent units would do. They would all move to the sound of the battle and attack.⁶ The higher unit only issued orders when it reasonably knew the situation. This constraint kept orders short and prevented the need to change the orders during later execution. The shorter timeframes aimed at eliminating confusion and prevented undermining the soldiers' faith in the command. Units did not simply allow the

⁵ Robert Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 159.

subordinate to fill in the details of how to execute the mission; they expected the subordinate to do so.⁷ The development of the General Staff also shaped the culture of the German army. General Staff officers were valued for their extreme technical ability and capacity for work. In addition to their abilities to plan, the General Staff officer provided extremely influential guidance to the commander.⁸

The German war plan of 1914, Deployment Plan 1914/15, fit directly into this culture. It aimed for a fast paced, aggressive offensive campaign. Field Marshal Count Alfred von Schlieffen first developed the framework of the 1914 war plan during the period 1891-1905 while Chief of German General Staff.⁹ After his retirement, Colonel-General Helmuth von Moltke modified it to meet a changed operational environment involving the increased fortification along the French border and the seeming weakness of Russia after the Russo-Japanese War. He also made adjustments for logistical purposes and accountd for command and control issues due to the realities of the size of the German Army.¹⁰

Even with the modifications, the plan followed three constants that Moltke the Elder aimed for: a detailed and synchronized deployment plan, the parts of the army remained apart until the plan required for logistics purposes, and an operational

⁷ Ibid., 152.

⁸ Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning* (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1993), 320.

⁹ Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, trans. Andrew and Eva Wilson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 17.

¹⁰ Annika Mombauer, "German War Plans," in *War Planning 1914*, ed. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 55-63.

envelopment aimed at encircling the enemy. *Aufmarsch* which translates to “deployment” was detailed and highly coordinated. The plan kept the separate armies using different routes and supply lines only planned to converge at the moment mass was needed, referred to as *getrennter Heeresteile* or “separate parts of the army.” Lastly, it aimed for *Umgehung*, translated to “bypass”, an attack aimed at encircling all or most of the enemy army.¹¹

Along with the strengths of the plan, it also suffered from the historic issues that plagued German operations. Moltke and the German General Staff’s modifications lacked effective reconnaissance and logistics plans.¹²

A few major decisions made by commanders and general staff officers, within the command culture of the German army including *Auftragstaktik*, may have contributed to the failure of the Marne Campaign. Conversely, some decisions made in accordance with the command culture may have contributed to the success of the campaign. Other decisions conflicted with the German command culture and negatively affected the campaign as well. Each decision can only be properly analyzed within the structure of the culture of the German army.

First, the decision by *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL), the German Army Supreme Headquarters, to place 1st Army under the command of 2nd Army’s commander, General von Bülow, resulted in Bülow commanding the right wing of the German attack on France. Bülow elected to remain in command of 2nd Army while 1st Army was under his

¹¹ Citino, 151.

¹² Martin van Creveld, *Supplying War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

control.¹³ Next, the commander of 1st Army, General von Kluck, after 1st Army was removed from the command of 2nd Army, decided to maneuver east of Paris instead of continuing west of the city.¹⁴ Third, a series of decisions made by OHL, Kluck, and Bülow resulted in a gap that contributed to a gap forming between 1st and 2nd Armies along the Marne River. Last, Moltke sent a General Staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Hentsch, forward to the front to assess the situation. Hensch determined the situation and ordered the right wing to cease the attack and maneuver to a defensible position, ending the German army attack in the Marne Campaign.¹⁵

The analysis of the decisions first focuses on each of these decisions regarding the adherence, or lack thereof, to German army culture and decentralized execution. Next, the analysis determines whether or not the decision contributed to the success or failure of the campaign.

The results of the analysis can help to determine both the feasibility and the advantages and disadvantages of decentralized execution. The analysis can also demonstrate how the command culture of an army effects how it executes decentralized execution. The setting of the German army within Marne Campaign allows the examination of how command culture effects how decentralized execution was

¹³ Karl von Bülow, *My Report of the Marne Battle*, trans. P. B. Harm, Command and General Staff College Archive, Ft Leavenworth, KS.

¹⁴ Alexander von Kluck *The March on Paris and the Battle of the Marne, 1914* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co, 1920), 21-22.

¹⁵ Holger H. Herwig, *The Marne: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011), 272.

conducted. Did the German Army, who first developed and implemented decentralized execution over the course of over 50 years, conduct it effectively?

CHAPTER 2

GERMAN ARMY CULTURE AND THE RISE OF *AUFTRAGSTAKTIK*

This chapter explores the evolution of German army culture including decentralized execution from the 1860s to 1914. Within the Germany army, decentralized execution developed through the concept of *Auftragstaktik*. The chapter will analyze the German army command culture prior to, during, and after the development of *Auftragstaktik* to analyze the effects of an army's command culture with the development of a decentralized execution command philosophy. Thorough analysis of the development of decentralized command and the command culture of the German army provides a foundation to understand the decisions leaders made during the planning and execution of the Marne Campaign.

German Army Culture

The concept of *Auftragstaktik* did not develop within a vacuum. Instead, it grew from within the command culture of the Prussian and German Armies which itself developed over many years. Although the German Army educationally draws back to the establishment of the *Kriegsakademie* by Gneisenau and Scharnhorst, culturally, however, the link goes further back.

Prussian and German officers of the 1800s and 1900s drew their cultural inspiration from as far back to Friedrich Wilhelm I, Great Elector of Brandenburg-Prussia from 1640 to 1688.¹⁶ The Prussian Army, therefore, developed for approximately 150 years before the concept of *Auftragstaktik* arose. This historic lineage provided the

¹⁶Citino, 2.

framework within which *Auftragstaktik* evolved. Removing the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* from the norms of the command culture it developed within allows for a wider range of decisions and actions of the leaders within that army. Understanding of the culture allows the development and implementation of the concept in war.

As it is understood today, Prussian militarism developed dramatically from the time of Frederick the Great who ruled Prussia in the latter half of the 1700s until the beginning of World War I. Isabel Hull described militarism as “the penetration of military values into society.”¹⁷ Before Frederick’s rule, the relationship between the military and the civilian populace could be described as tense. Frederick fostered a military orientation in the populace by training large numbers of forces, including reserves to have available in the event of war.¹⁸ By increasing number of the population serving in the army, either as a professional or reserve soldier, Frederick instilled the ethos of the military in a much larger amount of society.

After the Prussia’s defeat by Napoleon at Jena and Auerstedt in 1806, the army underwent extensive reforms to combat the French. General Gerhard von Scharnhorst, who had risen through the ranks of the Prussian Army, believed military acumen could be increased not only through experience but also through academic study.¹⁹ Scharnhorst

¹⁷ Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 2.

¹⁸ Gerhard Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter The Problem of Militarism in Germany, Volume II: The European Powers and the Wilhelminian Empire, 1890-1914* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1970), 95.

¹⁹ Charles Edward White, *The Enlightened Soldier: Scharnhorst and the ‘Militarische Gesellschaft’ in Berlin, 1801-1805* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1987), 255.

along with General August von Gneisenau led the reforms with the Military Reorganization Commission. First in 1807, the commission evaluated the generals of the Prussian Army. Out of 142 generals, 100 were dismissed. This massive change in the senior leaders of the Prussian Army freed the remaining leaders to quickly implement the needed changes with less resistance from senior leaders entrenched in the previous system. Next, in 1808, the laws regarding eligibility for the officer corps changed. Before the change, only members of the noble Junker class could seek commission. Afterwards, the bourgeois could compete for the Junkers for service as an officer.²⁰ The combination of removing unfit senior leaders and opening the officer corps to the bourgeois created an environment where merit influenced promotion, not hereditary position. Last, the commission established the *Kriegsakademie* in 1810 to deliberately develop its leaders in an academic setting. The *Kriegsakademie* served as an educational facility to train the best officers of the Prussian Army into General Staff officers.²¹ Overall, these changes opened the officer corps to a larger segment of society, established a deliberate development system for those officers, and encouraged promotion through merit.

The evolution of the public view of the military and the composition of the officer corps drove some key aspects of the German Army culture. Holding a reserve commission became a status symbol for German officials and men aspiring to hold positions within the government from the time of the reforms until the initiation of World War I. The Junker class however, still preferred to serve in the regular army. Active duty

²⁰ Citino, 129.

²¹ Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Winchester, MA: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 65.

officers and reserve officers typically followed very different career paths. In contrast to the reserve officer, the active duty officer made the military his main focus. He paid little to no attention to the political world. For example, the Crown Prince of Prussia asked Moltke if he was aware of the political situation as the army approached Paris in the Franco-Prussian War. Moltke replied, “No, I have only to concern myself with military matters.”²² This separation of the active duty military officer from the political world affected the conduct of war in important ways leading up to World War I, especially war planning.

Germany’s place in Central Europe drove development of the German Army in important ways as well. Until the 1890s, Germany neglected building a massive navy in favor of expanding the army. Germany could use a powerful navy to protect colonies from Britain, but it needed a powerful army for simple existence.²³ Its location between Russia and France opened it to the constant threat of attack from land. A powerful army ensured the security of the country. This location also helped to reinforce the emphasis on the attack since Germany lacked naturally defensive borders. The strength of the army ensured safety of the empire and by attacking, the army would not have to defend along the entire border.

These factors led to the development of a framework into which *Auftragstaktik* fit. The Prussian, and later the German, Army favored aggressive attack immediately upon contact with the enemy. This idea linked back with attacks as far back as those carried

²² Walter Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff, 1657-1945*, trans. Brian Battershaw (New York: Preager, 1953), 92.

²³ Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter*, 102.

out by Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg-Prussia. This concept of aggressive attack aimed at a swift, decisive victory. The *Kriegsakademie*, as discussed above, developed the officers to enable the maneuver of these forces. The large army required a new kind of command and the German Army developed leadership at the operational level. *Auftragstaktik* developed to enable a large force to move quickly and attack decisively, in line with both the cultural and academic heritage of the German Army.

First, the Prussian way, as described by Robert Citino, regarded finding the enemy and attacking him when and where he was found, even if the enemy outnumbered him. For example, at the Battle of Langensalza, in 1866, General von Flies made contact with the Austrian forces and attacked them immediately, even though he was badly outnumbered. The units adjacent to the flanks of Flies then reacted and assisted in the attack, resulting in a Prussian victory.²⁴ In his evaluation of the situation for the security of Prussia, Moltke determined that defenses from fortresses along the borders did not favor German forces. Instead, Moltke favored rapid mobility. He used the railways, fielded the infantry units with camping gear, and introduced field telegraph units.²⁵ Later during wargames with the General Staff, Schlieffen exemplified the preference for offensive operations by attacking, even when the mission was defense and he controlled fortifications and artillery advantages.²⁶ Even in defense, the German Army looked at offense as the key. As an evaluation by the General Staff explained before the start of World War I, “We are not out for conquest, but seek merely to defend what is ours. We

²⁴ Citino, 159.

²⁵ Görlitz, 76.

²⁶ Citino, 204.

shall probably never be the aggressors, always the attacked. The swift successes we shall need, however, can be achieved with certainty only when we take the offensive.”²⁷ Each of these examples showed not only the preference, but the seeming necessity for aggressive offensive operations.

To enable the attack in lieu of the defense, Prussia, and later Germany, required a large army and a way to command it. In 1869, Moltke issued “Instructions for Large Unit Commanders” which provided generals with the first handbook regarding the operational level of warfare. He also began running wargames and staff rides that were carefully analyzed.²⁸ The instructions from Moltke and wargames provided the instruction on how to maneuver these larger formations, and the staff ride provided a way to evaluate and improve the leaders’ execution of the maneuver.

Evolution of the General Staff

To enable the maneuver of the large forces, Prussia developed a specially trained group of officers to coordinate the deployment of the Army and execution of the war. Scharnhorst, as discussed, in the reforms after the defeats at Jena and Auerstedt, led the development of the required officer and established the General Staff. He stated, “An Army without a well-organized General Staff is like a country without a government.”²⁹

The General Staff continued to evolve, but when Moltke the Elder became the Chief of the General Staff in 1857, the Military Cabinet (Department of Personal Affairs)

²⁷ Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter*, 117.

²⁸ Citino, 150.

²⁹ White, 208.

held more prestige and power than the General Staff. The German Army leadership viewed the General Staff as secondary to the Military cabinet.³⁰ Moltke's recognition of the importance of speed in mobilization and deployment increased the importance of the railroads as a means to enable rapid mobility sparked the increased development of the General Staff.

The German General Staff was a new kind of organization shaped by knowledge. As the Prussian Army became dependent upon railroads, the task of size space, and time coordination created a new kind of officer. The general staff officer became one who gave consistent, dependable, technical performance: he was interchangeable. His goals were functional reliability and high work capacity. The German General Staff ethos derived from its technical core, the railroads.³¹

When Moltke assumed the position of Chief of the General Staff in 1857, the General Staff officers at the Headquarters numbered 64. By 1871, he increased that to 135, and by the time of his resignation in 1888 that number reached 239.³²

Under Moltke, the General Staff developed intensely detailed deployment plans to enable the German Army to move from its various stations throughout the country and move the border for combat. German General Staff planners believed that through precision they could drastically reduce or eliminate uncertainty in the deployment phase of the operation.³³ The General Staff officers gained their reputation due to precision and technical ability. German Army leadership valued military acumen of General Staff

³⁰ Görlitz, 69.

³¹ Bucholz, 320.

³² Görlitz, 96.

³³ Bucholz, 319.

officers far above general ability.³⁴ The German Army assigned a General Staff officer serving as the chief of staff to each army, corps, and division commander. The interchangeability of the General Staff officer gave comfort to the chiefs of staff to know each adjacent unit contained a fellow General Staff officer.³⁵

Under Moltke, the General Staff organized under a country-oriented system. The different departments within the General Staff focused on surrounding countries that could become possible threats later. When Waldersee became Chief of the General Staff in 1888, he rearranged the organization. He changed it to functional areas under the *Oberquartiermeisters*. *Oberquartiermeister* I focused on the deployment of the army. Training, fortresses and maps fell under the oversight of *Oberquartiermeister* II. *Oberquartiermeister* III analyzed foreign militaries. The Central Department, Military History Department, and the Survey Department all worked under the Chief of General Staff directly.³⁶ This reorganization changed the General Staff from focusing on surrounding countries to a task oriented structure. Each department oriented on a different part of war planning.

To achieve the three constants Moltke required specially trained and technically proficient officers. The selection and training of a General Staff officer enabled the development of the best officers in the Army. To become a General Staff officer, a candidate must be recommended by his supervisor and pass an entrance exam. The officer then attended the *Kriegsakademie* after which he must pass an extensive

³⁴ Ibid., 318.

³⁵ Citino, 149.

³⁶ Görlitz, 116.

comprehensive examination of the material learned at the academy. Next, the officer served on the General Staff for a two-year probationary period. After the completion of the probationary period, the officer took another examination and attended the annual practice journey with the Chief of the General Staff. Only after completing this process, could he then serve as a General Staff officer.³⁷ The army leadership revered General Staff officers for their abilities, but Moltke urged them to remain in the shadows of their unit commanders and not seek attention. The staff accepted blame themselves and directed credit to the commander.³⁸

During the Wars of Unification, the role and prestige of the General Staff increased. Before 1864, the General Staff's peacetime "authority was strictly limited to strategic plans and exercises, the training of General Staff officer, collection and evaluation of military intelligence from abroad, and, lastly, historical studies."³⁹ The General Staff served as a planning organization that gave the plan to the general commanding the Army in wartime. The Chief of General Staff served as an advisor only during combat operations. Shortly after the war began "a cabinet order was issued by which, subject to keeping the War Minister informed, the Chief of the General Staff was declared competent to issue orders on his own authority."⁴⁰ The Chief of General Staff gained the ability to command troops during war.

³⁷ Ibid., 96.

³⁸ Citino, 150.

³⁹ Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter*, 123.

⁴⁰ Görlitz, 86.

Now with the ability to command directly, Moltke led the army during the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871. During the war with France in, the Prussian Army encircled large portion of the French Army and defeated it. The encirclement of the French Army at Sedan made the Prussian General Staff's reputation. "This last was the Prussian General Staff's greatest triumph, and what is more it was recognized as such and Moltke and his collaborators became known in the Army as the demigods."⁴¹

After the wars of unification, the authority of the Chief of General Staff increased again. A special cabinet order issued in 1883 granted the Chief of the General Staff direct access to the Kaiser.⁴² The Kaiser remained the head of the German Army, but the responsibility for command shifted to the Chief of the General Staff in 1908. Wilhelm II, in response to a *Daily Telegraph* article, lost confidence. He decided that in the case of war, the Chief of the General Staff would command the army.⁴³ In the span of 50 years, the Chief of General Staff changed from a planning and advisory position to commanding the entire German Army.

Normaltaktik versus Auftragstaktik

After the wars of unification, the German Army sought to codify the best command style within the framework of the German Army culture previously described. Influential leaders within the German Army attempted to examine and describe the best practices discovered during the war. Two main methodologies gained popularity,

⁴¹ Ibid., 91.

⁴² Ibid., 97.

⁴³ Ibid., 146.

Normaltaktik and *Auftragstaktik*. Both theories saw the need to change from massed formation that lead to large numbers of casualties.

Captain Albrecht von Bogulslawski and Major Wilhelm von Scherff developed and advocated the concept of *Normaltaktik*.⁴⁴ *Normaltaktik* attempted to improve the effectiveness of the Army through the use of a limited number of standardized formations. Also, the theory advocated using open order formations, using massed firepower to “shatter” the enemy at the point of the assault, and changing the standard maneuver formation from the battalion to the company. By limiting the number of formations soldiers maneuvered in, proponents of *Normaltaktik* strove to reduce the amount of time soldiers needed to react to a situation. Open order formations limited the exposure of the soldiers on the attack by allowing them to seek cover and preventing a massed target for the enemy. Massed firepower allowed for the suppression of the enemy at the vital point of penetration for the assaulting forces. Flexibility increased by making the company the standard maneuver formation and again limited a massed target for the enemy.⁴⁵

In contrast to *Normaltaktik*, *Auftragstaktik* advocated the leeway for subordinate commanders to determine the best way to execute their assigned missions and execute them as they wished. Although the concept developed over many years, only after the Wars of Unification did the army specifically write it into the doctrine. The officers who codified *Auftragstaktik* into doctrine within the German army, Major Julius von Verdy du Vernois and Colonel Sigismund von Schlichting, saw themselves as intellectual disciples

⁴⁴ Echevarria, 33-38.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of Moltke. Key components of *Auftragstaktik* included allowing the subordinate commander the freedom to determine the method that he executed his assigned mission, controlling subordinate units through communication of intent and assigning tasks, and emphasizing individual initiative.⁴⁶

Rather than directing subordinate units exactly how to execute their missions, *Auftragstaktik* offered the subordinate the freedom to determine the best way to accomplish them. Units restricted the timeframe of their orders to a time when the situation was reasonably known. This short timeframe formed for two reasons. By focusing only on the short-term for their orders, orders would not have to be changed as much. Units felt that changing orders often would undermine the soldiers' faith in the command. Limiting the orders to just the immediate future also allowed the orders themselves to be shorter. At higher echelons orders were intentionally kept short. The higher echelon expected the lower to fill the gaps.⁴⁷ These gaps allowed the commander executing the mission to determine how to accomplish the mission. The shorter orders also allowed units to plan more quickly and execute earlier.

In these short orders, the commander ensured his intent and the assigned tasks to his subordinates were clear. As the modern battlefield expanded, the operational commander could not control all the subordinate units himself. The commander, operating within the construct of *Auftragstaktik*, determined that the clear communication of his intent and the assigning of tasks to his subordinates were the best way to control

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38-42.

⁴⁷ Citino, 152.

the forces under his command. These two aspects of the order carried the most importance.⁴⁸

When, and if, the situation changed the commander on the ground adjusted the plan as needed. Moltke the Elder famously stated, “No plan survives contact with the enemy main body.”⁴⁹ As the situation developed, the subordinate may identify the need to adjust the course of action. If time permitted, the subordinate would seek guidance from higher headquarters based off the changed situation. However, if adequate time did not exist, the subordinate would adjust the course of action on his own. As the situation developed, the subordinate chose between the three options of continue on the current course of action, adjust the plan within the intent of the higher commander, or adjust the execution of the mission within his own best judgment. If the change in the situation did not affect the mission in any major way, the current course of action could continue to be the best option. In the event the situation changed in a way that prevented accomplishing the mission as planned, the subordinate commander adjusted his course of action within the commander’s intent of the operation. In some cases, the situation changed so dramatically that the subordinate commander found himself in a situation that the commander’s intent did not cover. The higher commander then trusted the subordinate to operate within his own best judgment. As Prince Karl of Prussia stated, “The king . . . put him [Prince Karl of Prussia] on the staff because he had expected him to know when to disobey.”⁵⁰ With the advent of operations on exterior lines, speed of decision and action

⁴⁸ Echevarria, 41.

⁴⁹ Citino, 152.

⁵⁰ Görlitz, 76.

were incredibly important. According to Walter Görlitz, officers required “high mental qualities and a greatly enhanced capacity for independent decision on the part of subordinate leaders.”⁵¹

Although the two concepts of *Normaltaktik* and *Auftragstaktik* may not contradict each other in all areas, some important differences could lead to lasting effects. For example, the use of a few, standardized formations could have been seen as limiting initiative of the subordinate. After the publication of the manual that Colonel von Schlichting had heavily influenced, *Auftragstaktik* became the command method embraced by the German Army. Even advocates of *Normaltaktik* admitted the manual’s value.⁵²

What effects did this culture and leadership framework have on planning and execution of operations? First, *Auftragstaktik* enabled enormous flexibility within the German Army. Commanders at each level would constantly analyze the situation to determine if they felt any changes needed to be made to execution of the mission. If the commander recognized the need to change, he did. The size of the modern battlefield would prevent timely communication. Schlieffen predicted in 1909 that commanders would be far back from the lines, separated from the soldiers at the front. Reports would come to them in spacious houses and from there the commander would orchestrate the battle.⁵³ By enabling the leaders at all levels to make important decisions, the German

⁵¹ Ibid., 75.

⁵² Echevarria, 43.

⁵³ Bucholz, 320.

Army reacted quickly. Possible issues could arise, however, with maintaining unity of effort.

Even with subordinates able to make decisions on their own, higher headquarters still needed to provide guidance. The command and control issues of large armies with the technology of the time worried Schlieffen. The commanders of each side could no longer see the entire battlefield, or even a significant portion of it. Instead, commanders would need to rely on the reporting of subordinate commanders to gain situational awareness. The commander would also need to issue orders through radio or telegraph transmissions.⁵⁴ In 1913 Schlieffen foresaw the challenges ahead in command by proclaiming, “the command of an army of millions is a problem that can scarcely be solved.”⁵⁵

By pairing the need for subordinates to constantly adjust to the changing situation with a culture of aggressive attack upon contact with the enemy, two areas within planning and execution could suffer. Traditionally the German Army emphasized maneuver and frequently sacrificed reconnaissance and logistics.⁵⁶ A constantly changing environment could make supporting a large force logistically much more difficult. A commander could see the need to adjust his plan during an operation and the logistician would need to adapt as well. The aggressive attack of an enemy immediately upon making contact could prevent the development of the situation by reconnaissance. Reconnaissance requires gaining and maintaining contact with the enemy without

⁵⁴ Citino, 207.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁶ Ibid., xiv.

becoming decisively engaged. If a commander decided to attack immediately upon contact with the enemy, he could degrade the ability to develop the situation and report accurately to higher headquarters due to the requirement to direct the attack. Therefore, the culture of aggressive attack upon contact could hinder reconnaissance.

Doctrine

The doctrine of the Germany Army clearly demonstrated significant aspects of the command culture. The 1908 tactics manual for the Germany Army leading up to World War I, written by Lieutenant General (then Colonel) Wilhelm Balck reflected the preference for attack, mission-type orders, and the challenges of reconnaissance. Balck began the chapter on the attack by stating,

The defense may repulse the enemy, but only the attack can annihilate him. The decision as to whether the force is to attack or stand on the defense depends upon the tactical situation and the will of the commander, and not upon numerical superiority, of which one is not aware, as a rule, until after the battle. Determined attacks, again and again repeated, in spite of all failures, are the surest means of gaining victory and of preventing the enemy from becoming aware of his superiority. Only pressing reasons (marked hostile superiority, necessity for awaiting approaching reinforcements, or the failure of an attack), and never favorable terrain conditions, should determine a commander to stand on the defensive. In defense, the eventual assumption of the offense is kept constantly in view. A commander who voluntarily stands on the defensive for the purpose of letting the opponent attack, and then attacks him in turn, reaps only the disadvantages and never the advantages of both the offensive and defensive.⁵⁷

By highlighting the fact that the enemy's exact number would not be known, the above passage downplayed developing the situation and instead recommended attack. It also warns that waiting in defensive positions only has negative consequences. Therefore, it required the leader to attack and attack continuously, even if the previous attack failed.

⁵⁷ Wilhelm Balck, *Tactics vol. 1: Introduction and Formal Tactics of Infantry*, trans. Walter Krueger (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Cavalry Association, 1915), 329.

The above passage clearly demonstrates the preference for attack in all but the worst conditions.

In regards to orders, the manual reinforces the concept of *Auftragstaktik*. Within the chapter on orders, the manual reads,

Since leaders change during the course of the combat, the order must ensure cooperation of the component parts of the force by thoroughly explaining the purpose of the fight. The troops have a right to know what the commander expects of them. . . . The commander must demand that no subordinate ‘hide’ behind an order and that, on the contrary, he act on his own initiative when an order is not received or the situation changes.⁵⁸

In the few short sentences above, the manual clearly described important aspects of *Auftragstaktik*. It emphasized the importance of informing subordinates of the purpose of a mission, and also the requirement of the subordinate to react to a changing situation.

Rather than simply allowing a subordinate to make a decision, the doctrine demanded the subordinate do so.

Last, the manual highlights the challenges in infantry reconnaissance saying, “The primary objective in local reconnaissance is to protect a force from surprise.”⁵⁹ The use of infantry reconnaissance, therefore, focused less on determining as much as possible about the enemy than protecting the main body. In effect, the infantry reconnaissance performed more what would now be known as a security task, such as screen or guard. In the use of cavalry reconnaissance, the manual reads, “Cavalry, unlike infantry or artillery, cannot be improvised during the course of a campaign.”⁶⁰ The statement clearly showed

⁵⁸ Balck, *Tactics vol. 1: Introduction and Formal Tactics of Infantry*, 243.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Wilhelm Balck, *Tactics vol. 2: Cavalry, Field and Heavy Artillery in Field Warfare*, trans. Walter Krueger (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Cavalry Association, 1915), 3.

the difficulty the German Army had in determining how to support attacks with effective reconnaissance. The infantry could adjust due to the situation, but cavalry could not.

Within this command culture, the General Staff prepared plans for Germany in the event of war, including decentralized execution through *Auftragstaktik*, aggressive attack, and Moltke's three constants in planning. Analysis in the next chapter will focus on the development of the war plan and how it fit into the established command culture of the German army.

CHAPTER 3

GERMAN ARMY WAR PLANNING

For two reasons, determining the effects of decentralized execution on the Marne Campaign requires understanding the German plan for the Marne Campaign. First, the German Great General staff and army commanders adjusted their courses of action in execution dependent on the situation. Adequate analysis of the execution of Marne Campaign requires thorough analysis of the German war plan. This chapter provides analysis of the German war plan within the command culture of the German army to determine if it followed or differed from the command culture. The chapter also identifies areas in the the plan that included opportunities when commanders were afforded more opportunity for initiative.

Recently, the existence of the Schlieffen Plan became the subject of controversy. Historian Terence Zuber posited that the Schlieffen plan never existed.⁶¹ He claims that after the war German generals developed the idea of the Schlieffen Plan to make Moltke the Younger the scapegoat for their actions due to his modifications to the original plan. Theses modifications then led to the changes in Germany's execution of the Marne Campaign in August and September 1914 and ultimately Germany's loss in World War I. Since the appearance of his theory, however, the German archives located in the former East Germany, thought destroyed in a British air raid in 1945, were found at least partially intact. Since the discovery of these archives, the work of historians such as

⁶¹ Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Terence Zuber, *The Real German War Plan, 1904-1914* (Stroud: History Press, 2011).

Gerhard Gross and Holger Herwig had shown the Schlieffen Plan actually existed and the leadership of the Germany army accepted it as the beginning point of the war plan used in 1914.⁶²

The German war plan developed over years of analyzing, planning, and adjusting. Military operations occur within the context of both the internal and external political environment. Therefore, understanding the environment in which the planners developed the plan is key, even if the planners themselves were not as aware of the non-military situation. The generals of the Great General Staff tended to focus on purely military concerns, consistent with Prussian leaders in the past including Moltke as discussed earlier. The militarism of Prussia and then Germany allowed the military planners more ability to operate outside the sphere of the civilian oversight. Annika Mombauer sums up the situation as, “Germany’s political leaders exerted little to no control over military decision-makers and war planning was conducted by them almost in a vacuum.”⁶³

War Planning Prior to Schlieffen

As the world progressed toward the 20th Century and became more and more modern, the leaders of the German Army saw the increased danger in war. In a speech to the Reichstag on 14 May 1890, Moltke predicted the danger of modern war:

Gentlemen, if war, which has now for more than ten years been hanging like a sword of Damocles over our heads - if war breaks out, one cannot foresee how long it will last or how it will end. It is the Great Powers of Europe which, armed as they never were before, are now entering the arena against each other. There is not one of these that can be so completely overcome in one, or even in two campaigns that it will be forced to declare itself vanquished or to conclude an

⁶² Herwig, 327-331.

⁶³ Mombauer, 48.

onerous peace; not one that will be unable to rise again, even if only after a year, to renew the struggle. Gentlemen, it may be a Seven Years' War, it may be a Thirty Years' War; and woe be to him who sets Europe in flames, who first casts the match into the powder-barrel.⁶⁴

He also pointed out the inability for Germany to win a two front war by stating, “Germany cannot hope to rid herself of one enemy by a quick offensive victory in the West in order to then turn against the other. We have just seen how difficult it is to bring even the victorious war against France to an end.”⁶⁵ Instead, Moltke the Elder determined military actions contained no chance of defeating both France and Russia. He instead urged Germany’s leadership to resolve any situation involving France and Russia through diplomatic means.⁶⁶

During his service as the Chief of General Staff, Moltke directed the sections to begin developing deployment plans to prepare in the case war broke out. Beginning in 1879, the General Staff prepared two deployment plans a year, one each against France and Russia.⁶⁷ Moltke the Elder viewed Russia as the primary threat, but the Chiefs of General Staff after him, specifically Waldersee and Schlieffen, changed that focus to France.⁶⁸ The desire for multiple options to operate from not only fit with the personality of Moltke himself, but also the German command culture. Although Moltke saw the

⁶⁴ Helmuth von Moltke, *Essays, Speeches and Memoirs vol II*, trans. Charles Flint McLumpha, C. Barter, and Mary Herms (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), 137.

⁶⁵ Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1958), 18.

⁶⁶ Herwig, 31.

⁶⁷ Görlitz, 100.

⁶⁸ Mombauer, 48-49.

futility of fighting Russia and France simultaneously, he needed, nevertheless, to have some sort of plan in place if the situation arose in which he needed to act.

One of the deployment plans of 1879 included a defense against France in the west and an attack on Russia in the east in coordination with Austria-Hungary. The plan called for six corps of Italian Soldiers to help secure the western border of Germany.⁶⁹ The German army did not execute this plan due to Moltke's retirement and the fact that war did not begin until 35 years later. By then, the world was a very different place.

The Schlieffen Plan

The time between the retirement of Moltke the Elder and Schlieffen writing his famous memorandum of December 1905, saw the strategic situation change in some important ways. First, Wilhelm II removed Otto von Bismarck from his position as Chancellor. Suddenly, Germany lost the diplomatic mastermind who shaped the situation to keep the situation favorable to Germany. In 1893 Germany allowed its treaty with Russia to expire. France quickly stepped in, and by 1894 Russia and France had signed a treaty. Germany found itself in the position it feared and Moltke warned about, encircled by enemies.

Next in 1904-1905, Russia fought and lost a costly war against Japan. After this war, Germany saw a considerably weakened Russia that needed to recover and rebuild from its losses in personnel, equipment. German military leaders paid attention to the

⁶⁹ Görlitz, 100-101.

smaller conflicts such as the Russo-Japanese War, leading up to World War I. The idea of the leadership being taken by surprise with developments of modern war is untrue.⁷⁰

Meanwhile, France heavily fortified its border with Germany. Schlieffen and the rest of the Great General Staff shifted the focus away from Russia to France as its biggest threat. Due to France's heavily fortified border with Germany, Schlieffen determined that assaulting those fortifications would be too costly in time and soldiers' lives. To attack France would need to bypass these fortifications. Schlieffen saw two options. To the south, an approach through Switzerland posed major problems due to mountainous terrain and a formidable military. However, to the north Luxembourg maintained no army and Belgium's army posed much less of a threat.⁷¹

In 1905, Schlieffen developed his plan to deal with the existing problem of fighting both France and Russia. He determined that fighting both France and Russia simultaneously led only to loss for Germany. He decided to execute a quick, decisive attack to destroy the French Army, and follow that by moving the army to the east to fight Russia. In effect, Schlieffen solved the problem of fighting France and Russia simultaneously by fighting quick, successive wars against each. This concept fits directly with the German command culture in its desire to fight short, decisive wars.

Schlieffen wrote a book of situations used to reinforce within the German General Staff the concept of the battle of annihilation.⁷² He titled this book *Cannae*, which

⁷⁰ Citino, 196.

⁷¹ Mombauer, 52.

⁷² Alfred von Schlieffen, *Cannae* (Fort Leavenworth: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1936), ix.

included Hannibal's famous battle as the first vignette. Schlieffen's title and placement of Cannae told of his desire for the decisive battle of annihilation.

Schlieffen's memorandum of 1905 called for massing the German Army to the west and attacking through Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands to bypass France's prepared defenses. Schlieffen acknowledged the plan violated the neutrality of all three countries but deemed the violation as militarily necessary. Schlieffen stated, "An offensive which seeks to wheel round Verdun must not shrink from violating the neutrality of Belgium as well as of Luxembourg."⁷³ As for the Netherlands, the memorandum of December 1905 says, "The Netherlands regard England, allied to France, no less as an enemy than does Germany. It will be possible to come to an agreement with them."⁷⁴ Only one German army would deploy to the east to defend against any rapid, small-scale invasion efforts from Russia. The whole plan called for the complete annihilation of the French army in 39-40 days to enable repositioning Germany's forces to the east before Russia could mobilize and mount a substantial attack against Eastern Germany.⁷⁵ The memorandum of December 1905 ends with the conclusion "Germans must therefore be as strong as possible on their right wing, because here the decisive battle is to be expected."⁷⁶

The German Army made three important assumptions in the Schlieffen Plan. First, the General Staff believed Russia would need at least 40 days to mobilize. Next,

⁷³ Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, 41.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 136-137.

⁷⁵ Mombauer, 53.

⁷⁶ Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, 148.

they assumed Belgian and Dutch rail lines would be seized intact and would be able to support the attack in the movement of troops and supplies. Third, the Schlieffen plan assumed complete operational surprise could be achieved against the French and British armies. Last, it assumed that after the defeat of France, the German rail system could quickly transport troops from the west to the east to fight the Russians.⁷⁷ If any of these assumptions failed to occur, the whole plan could collapse.

Schlieffen's memorandum of December 1905 fits within the German command culture in many important ways. First, it aims for a decisive battle to achieve victory as quickly as possible. Second, the plan calls for an attack. Schlieffen drew up this plan within the geo-political situation of the time, but did not concern itself with the reason for the beginning of hostilities. Therefore, regardless of why war began, the German army planned to attack. Third, the plan contained reconnaissance and logistical issues. While the plan contains many instances of contingencies for execution if the French army took certain actions, the memorandum never identifies how the German Army could effectively use reconnaissance to determine any of the French actions. Martin van Creveld's analysis of the plan showed logistical difficulties of the campaign.⁷⁸

In one very important aspect Schlieffen's memorandum deviated from the normal expectations of German command culture. Within the plan Schlieffen wrote, "it will be advisable for the Germans [in all these cases] to change their operational plans as little as possible."⁷⁹ In an army that espoused initiative for leaders at all levels, this statement

⁷⁷ Herwig, 37.

⁷⁸ van Creveld, *Supplying War*, 138.

⁷⁹ Ritter, 147.

completely violated the cultural norms. Also, Schlieffen devised the plan without using the army he had at the time. When Schlieffen wrote his original plan, eight of the corps in his plan did not actually exist. He instead called for the creation of these corps for the completion of his plan.⁸⁰

Development of Deployment Plan 1914/15

The German army, however, did not execute the Schlieffen's plan laid out in the memorandum of December 1905. Schlieffen retired at the end of 1905. On 1 January 1906 Helmuth von Moltke the Younger became the Chief of the German General Staff. He did not simply disregard the work of Schlieffen. In fact "Moltke confirmed that he had inherited a copy of Germany's 'one' operations plan from Schlieffen."⁸¹ For the next nine years Moltke led the effort to turn Schlieffen's memorandum into a complete deployment plan and adjust it to the changes the world endured.

From 1906 to 1914 several major developments occurred which shaped the German war plan. First as Schlieffen retired, Germany was already involved in the First Moroccan Crisis. The crisis ended in May 1906 and resulted in closer ties between France and Britain. A second crisis occurred in 1911 involving the gunboat "Panther". In November of that year, France and Germany signed the Treaty of Fez. Again, the aftermath brought France and Britain closer together diplomatically. Militarily, both France and Russia began increasing the size and improving the equipment of their respective armies. Germany's allies remained Austria-Hungary and Italy, but the Great

⁸⁰ Herwig, 37.

⁸¹ Ibid., 40.

General Staff doubted Austria-Hungary's military effectiveness and Italy's commitment to the alliance.⁸² Germany found itself bordered by increasingly dangerous enemies to the east and west with inept and unreliable allies.

To turn the Schlieffen's memorandum of December 1905 into a feasible deployment, Moltke the Younger evaluated the plan and made adjustments. First, as early as 1907 Moltke the Younger tested certain parts of the plan to determine its feasibility. Moltke directed Karl von Fassbender, Chief of Bavarian Staff to wargame parts of the Schlieffen Plan.⁸³

To limit the international fallout from violating the sovereignty of neighboring countries, Moltke decided to change the deployment. He decided to eliminate the portion of the deployment through the Netherlands and only move through Belgium and Luxembourg. By limiting the route of the deployment, the German army would have to attack Liège in Belgium. If the deployment progressed through the Netherlands, the army could bypass the fortifications of Liège. Instead the army needed to attack and seize the fortress before moving troops through Belgium and attacking France. Only if the fortress at Liège could not be seized would the German army move through the Netherlands. Moltke outlined this idea in his notes in the Deployment Plan 1909/10.⁸⁴ As an alternative to attacking Liège, Deployment Plan 1913/14 included informing Belgium of its intentions and demanding Belgium open its forts and allow German forces to pass

⁸² Mombauer, 54.

⁸³ Herwig, 40.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 43.

through.⁸⁵ If Belgium agreed to allow Germany to move through unopposed, precious time could be saved on the attack on France. The army could also move troops and supplies more efficiently if Belgium allowed the German deployment by leaving the rail lines intact.

Second, Moltke decided to reduce the numbers of troops on the right wing of the attack. General Wilhelm Groener, head of the railway section of the General Staff, accused Moltke of watering down the Schlieffen Plan in “*Das Testament der Grafen Schlieffen*” and “*Der Feldherr wider Willen.*”⁸⁶ While Groener made these observations after the war, Moltke, in pre-war planning had to ensure the German army could adequately defend Germany if France attacked in force. The Deployment Plan of 1913/14 directed 6th and 7th armies to defend the left wing of the attack. By keeping more forces along the French border, Moltke reduced the strength of the right wing from a seven to one ratio compared to the Entente forces down to a three to one ratio.⁸⁷

The evolution in the German war plan also involved the cancellation of any deployment plan against Russia. Moltke cancelled Germany’s only operations plan directed toward Russia in February 1913.⁸⁸ His decision resulted in only one option for Germany in the event war began. Regardless of the reason for the war, the deployment plan called for Germany to mobilize and attack France immediately.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁶ Citino, 218.

⁸⁷ Herwig, 44.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 44.

Last, the German army built new corps to provided the required personnel for the attack. As stated above, eight corps contained within Schlieffen's memorandum of December 1905 did not exist. Moltke attempted to make up for this deficiency. However, at the outbreak of war, the German army still found itself five corps short of the number called for in the original plan.

The Deployment Plan of 1914/15, the plan Germany executed at the outset of the war, called for seven German armies arrayed along Germany's borders with Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Two armies, Sixth and Seventh, would defend the German border with France. The center, consisting of Fourth and Fifth Armies, provided the pivot of the attack. The right wing, made up of First, Second, and Third Armies, provided the attack through Belgium to encircle the French and British, if they joined the war on the side of France, armies to complete the annihilation (see figure 1). The Deployment Plan of 1914/15 also directed one army, Eighth Army, to move east and provide an initial defense against Russia in case Russian deployment progressed faster than expected.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Mombauer, 65.

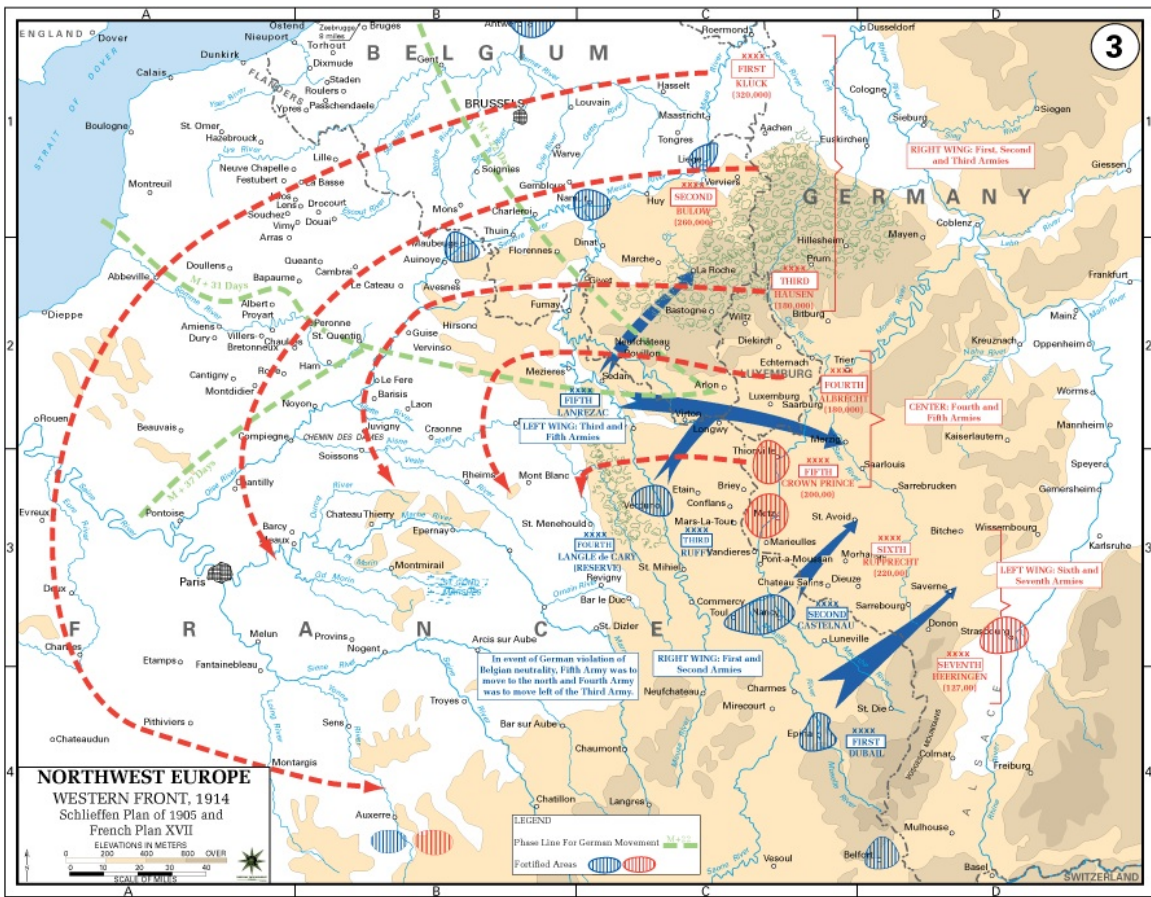


Figure 1. Deployment Plan of 1914/15

Source: United States Military Academy West Point, “Northwest Europe, 1914, Western Front, The Schlieffen Plan and the French Plan,” Campaign Atlas to the Great War, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/sitepages/wwi.aspx>. Note: Although the map incorrectly states the German Deployment is that of the Schlieffen Plan, it accurately depicts the German Deployment Plan 1914/15.

The German Deployment Plan 1914/15 varied between aligning with and deviating from the German army command culture. The plan called for an immediate attack upon the outbreak of war instead of executing a defense along its borders. The German army leadership’s thinking aligned completely with the command culture of the aggressive attack rather than defense. Moltke’s changes tempered Schlieffen’s call for an

even larger right wing, but the idea of the attack remained. The plan followed with Moltke the Elder's three constants to different degrees. The initial deployment followed an extremely detailed timeline with train timetables determined to the minute. The armies used different routes to maneuver, although the decision not to move through the Netherlands caused First, Second, and Third Armies to begin their movements through Belgium in a relatively small corridor until they could fully deploy along the French-Belgium border. The plan directed an encirclement of the entire French and British forces deployed along the border. It fits directly with Moltke the Elder's desire for a *Kesselschlacht*.

However, the traditional German shortcomings showed themselves once again in the Deployment Plan 1914/15. The plan called for an annihilation of the enemy army, a purely enemy focused plan. However, the plan did not detail how the German army could determine the location or movements of the French or British. Unexpected actions by either or both could derail the entire operation. Logistically, the requirements to support the right wing could overload the railway after it left German soil. Besides providing supplies, it limited the ability to reposition any forces if the right wing proved unable to accomplish its mission with the forces on hand.

While Deployment Plan 1914/15 did not directly address the ability for subordinate leaders to operate with initiative, Schlieffen's original memorandum specifically stated the importance of leaders following the plan. This statement went completely against the command culture. One plan could not fundamentally change the way the German army leadership fought, and such a statement could not expect

subordinates to adhere to a defined course of action upon contact with the enemy's main body.

Importantly, Deployment Plan 1914/15 contained a few key areas in which army commanders could exercise initiative. The first area included whether or not 1st Army would maneuver to the east or west of Paris. The Germans executed an enemy focused operation. Therefore, the location of the French and British left flank could determine the necessity of an encirclement of Paris. If the left flank of the Entente forces extended to Paris, 1st Army may need to maneuver around the city to the west. This axis of advance would protect the German right flank as it attempted to encircle the French and British armies. Conversely, if the Entente left flank ended before Paris, 1st Army could change its axis to the east of Paris. Again, the operation focused on the destruction of the French and British armies. In fact during a wargame, Schlieffen himself maneuvered to the east of Paris and still managed to encircle the French Army.⁹⁰ If envelopment of the flank could preclude maneuver around Paris while still achieving the desired encirclement, 1st Army could move a shorter distance and avoid the complication of dealing with the large civilian populace.

Secondly, the deployment plan offered the ability of German forces on the left flank to attack to complete the desired effect of encirclement. A few events could trigger the left wing in Alsace and Lorraine to attack. First, if the right wing could not achieve their task, they could transition to a defense. At that point, the left wing could attack and still achieve the encirclement. Also if right wing neared completion of the encirclement, the left wing could transition to offense and complete the effect. Either one of these

⁹⁰ Herwig, 36.

decisions required an overall understanding of the situation. If the left wing attacked without one of the above conditions, it could force the French forces to retreat and escape the encirclement, the overall aim of the operation.

The next chapter will analyze the execution of the Marne Campaign to determine how it fit into German Army command culture, including *Auftragstaktik*. It will analyze how the commanders executed Deployment Plan 1914/15 at the outset of World War I. Did the commanders follow the idea of *Auftragstaktik* effectively or did they stray from it? Also, did those decisions aid in the execution of the campaign or did they hinder its success?

CHAPTER 4

EXECUTION OF THE MARNE CAMPAIGN

With the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on 28 June 1914, the world began its move toward war. On 31 July, Germany declared a state of “imminent danger of war” and the army began to mobilize in accordance with Deployment Plan 1914/15. The next day Germany declared war on Russia, thus triggering war declarations from other European countries due to the treaties of the time.⁹¹ Over the next month and a half, three major powers would fight a massive series of battles known now as the Marne Campaign as each attempted to secure victory. By the middle of September, the German attack failed and the armies on the Western Front began forming the trenches in and around which they would fight for the next four years.

This chapter will examine the effects of select key decisions made in the execution of the Marne Campaign. As with any military operation of a similar size to the Marne Campaign, not every decision can be analyzed. More decisions were made in the immediate action than could be discussed or even recorded. For the purpose of this thesis, only actions pertaining to armies will be considered. This limitation will help to keep the analysis concise and clear enough to gain proper understanding.

Additionally, even at the army level leaders made multiple decisions every day. Rather than attempt to cover all of the decisions army commanders made, this chapter will focus on a few pivotal decisions, the reasons for the decisions, and the effects of the

⁹¹ Herwig, 17.

decisions. Within this construct, the successes and failures of decentralized execution within the German army will be determined.

Bülow in Command of the Right Wing

The first decision this thesis will analyze is the determination to place 1st Army under the command of 2nd Army. The order from OHL came after the campaign began, and the armies' headquarters had to adjust to the new command structure during execution. The idea of military organizations adjusting their command structure during execution was not unusual, but the order and the following decision by General von Bülow, the commander of 2nd Army carried wide ranging consequences.

Upon mobilization, The seven armies of the western front arrayed along the border of Germany with France, Luxembourg, and Belgium. As Deployment Plan 1914/15 stated, the right wing of the German Army would pass through Belgium before beginning it's envelopment of the French and British forces.⁹² OHL placed 1st Army under the command of 2nd Army on 17 August as the battle around Liège progressed. General Alexander von Kluck, the 1st Army commander could not understand the reason for the order stating,

No reasons were given for thus unexpectedly placing the flank armies under one commander. The commander of the First Army considered that the measure would limit his powers of command, and that it might apparently have been avoided if timely directions had been sent to both armies.⁹³

⁹² Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12.

⁹³ Kluck, 21-22.

Kluck assumed that OHL could provide timely orders during the attack. In fact, OHL established its headquarters many miles from the army headquarters, first in Germany and then later in Luxembourg. Reports from the separate armies needed to travel through multiple relay stations and up to 20 hours could pass before OHL received them.⁹⁴ Of course the same process occurred when OHL sent the orders from its location to the armies themselves. All the while, each of the armies on the right wing continued to move.

As stated by Kluck, Bülow had the advantage of being centrally located in the right wing. Rather than agreeing that 2nd Army's position in the center of the right wing provided the best location to command from, Kluck argued,

It could have been foreseen that the Second Army supported as it was on both flanks, would probably be confronted more especially with tactical problems, whereas the First Army would be faced by a situation pre-eminently strategical in its aspects.⁹⁵

While Kluck correctly saw the central position of 2nd Army as supported on both flanks, he only saw the picture as separate armies, rather than one unit accomplishing the same overall mission. Had he seen the right wing armies as one unit, he may have seen the advantage of a centrally located commander to coordinate their operations.

As for Bülow, he only briefly mentions the change in command structure in his memoirs. He states, "For this advance north of the Meuse, the 1st and 2nd Armies and Cavalry Corps No. 2, were placed under my command" in accordance with OHL's order.⁹⁶ The above quote composed the entirety of Bülow's remarks regarding the

⁹⁴ Herwig, 171.

⁹⁵ Kluck, 22.

⁹⁶ Bülow, *My Report of the Marne Battle*, trans. P.B. Harm, Command and General Staff College Archive, Ft Leavenworth, KS, 5.

change. Bülow's lack of further explanation could indicate how little he thought about the matter.

The reasoning behind the decision to place Bülow in command of all three right wing armies could have been a few reasons. First, as Kluck stated, 2nd Army formed the middle of the right wing. Bülow should have had the best overall situational awareness from that position rather than an army commander on either of his flanks. The plan also required Bülow to coordinate more due to his central location. He needed to maintain contact between himself and the armies on his left and right, all while each of these organizations fought and moved.

Second, the route 1st and 2nd Armies needed to take to get to the border of Belgium and France contained a portion with a relatively small gap through which both armies had to pass. Both 1st and 2nd Armies needed to travel through the 80 kilometer Liège Gap near simultaneously.⁹⁷ OHL could not feasibly coordinate the movement of the armies through the gap from its location while still maintaining overall control of the campaign. By putting Bülow in command, he could manage the coordination on the ground.

The third possible reason relates closely to the second. OHL could not feasibly control the actions of seven independent armies. By placing one of the army commanders in overall command of the right wing, OHL could drastically reduce its span of control. Rather than needing three separate orders for the right wing, OHL could instead issue one order. Bülow could then give the separate orders to 1st and 3rd Armies and reduce the amount of time coordinating through OHL.

⁹⁷ Herwig, 118.

The last possible reason for OHL's decision to place Bülow in charge could be his standing as a General Staff officer. Kluck, unlike most of the other army commanders had not served as a General Staff officer. OHL may have felt more comfortable with a General Staff officer in command, being a known quantity.

Upon receiving the order placing 1st and 3rd Armies under his command, Bülow decided to remain the commander of 2nd Army. Thus, he attempted to command his own army and also coordinate the actions of the other two armies rather than becoming an "army group"⁹⁸ commander and delegating command of 2nd Army to one of his subordinates.

This decision could lead Bülow to become too involved in 1st Army's operations. Also, he could become focused on his army and issue orders to 1st Army that were unattainable. First, Bülow began issuing orders directly to corps within 1st Army. For example, on 24 August, Bülow ordered, "The IX. Corps will advance immediately west of Maubeuge to outflank the enemy's left wing; the III. Corps will move in echelon behind the IX. Corps and confirm its movements."⁹⁹ By sending orders to 1st Army, detailing how its corps maneuvered, Bülow infringed upon Kluck's ability to execute his mission as he saw best. This stifled the initiative of Kluck, whom at the time was subordinate to Bülow, by limiting his courses of action.

As for unattainable orders for 1st Army, Bülow ordered them to advance further than possible on 20 August, likely due to his lack of knowledge on 1st Armies situation.

⁹⁸ German Army doctrine at the time did not contain the echelon of army group. By placing Bülow in command of the entire right wing, OHL effectively used the concept though.

⁹⁹ Kluck, 52.

Kluck remarked, “From the very position of the corps, the nearer of these two objectives could not be reached by the time ordered, nor the farther one within the course of a day.”¹⁰⁰ Had Bülow stepped back from the details of the situation of 2nd Army, he could have gained better overall understanding along the entire front of both armies and issued better orders.

In relation to decentralized execution, Kluck felt that Bülow infringed upon his army’s ability to accomplish the mission. As the above quotes show, Kluck viewed Bülow as a peer and not a superior. By taking units away from him at a moment’s notice and not always in situations that warranted it, Kluck may have felt that Bülow meddled in the execution of his mission, which he felt was had strategic implications as compared to Bülow’s tactical.

In addition, *Auftragstaktik* requires each commander to understand where his organization fits into the overall plan. Kluck clearly felt his army was the main effort with Bülow simply staying with his flank to form the continuous German line. Bülow, now in command of all three armies could easily see how he could be the main effort considering OHL put him in command. Without clarification from OHL on the purpose of each army, both army commanders could feel they were the main effort. This confusion is the exact reason units’ roles in the overall plan were important. Kluck saw his units being pulled away, and Bülow felt he had every right to do so.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 29.

1st Army Turns East of Paris

As the right wing of the German attack continued along the routes prescribed in Deployment Plan 1914/15, the units sent reports back to OHL with their progress. These reports on 30 and 31 August relayed the successes of the armies as 1st Army continued to move southwest toward Paris, 2nd Army moved southwest in the middle of the right wing, and 3rd Army moved south to connect the right wing to the pivot point of 4th Army. Bülow went as far as declaring “total victory” against the French 5th Army. Kluck also declared 1st Army had “swept all enemy forces from the field.”¹⁰¹

The time quickly approached where the right wing must either continue southwest and envelop Paris itself or change course to more or less due south to continue to the east of Paris. As discussed in the previous chapter, the German plan did not focus on terrain. Instead, the Germans desired the encirclement of the entire French army, as well as the BEF if they intervened.

Kluck earlier had wanted to continue southwest to find the flank of French and make contact with BEF. He saw his primary concern to be the finding of the Entente forces’ left flank and enveloping it. Kluck tried to continue further southwest on 22 August, but Bülow overruled him. Bülow’s 2nd Army could not maintain contact with both 1st Army on its right and 3rd Army on its left if 1st Army continued to stretch the lines further and further.

On the evening of 28 August, Kluck’s headquarters received directions from OHL which stated in part, “The strong resistance which is expected to be met on the Aisne and later on the Marne may necessitate a wheel inwards of the Armies from a south-westerly

¹⁰¹ Herwig, 195.

to a southerly direction.”¹⁰² Kluck understood the order’s meaning of giving him the decision of which course of action to pursue. If he needed to change the route of his army, he had every ability to.

The two options, west of Paris or east of Paris, each contained advantages and disadvantages. If Kluck decided to continue in a southwesterly direction, he could prevent exposing his flank to Paris. Not only would this protect his flank, but the entire German Army’s flank. The first disadvantage of continuing west of Paris involved the distance. Kluck’s army would need to march much longer. Considering the exhaustion of his soldiers, they may not have been physically able to accomplish the needed distance and maintain the tempo of the attack. Kluck referred to them as “long-suffering.” Second, if Kluck continued southwest, he would need to extend his supply lines even further than they already were. Possibly the most important though, OHL did not provide 1st Army with the needed troops to encircle Paris.

In contrast, by changing his movement to the south, Kluck would expose his flank to Paris. The advantages of though would be shortening the distance 1st Army needed to move to complete the envelopment of the French Army and the BEF. Kluck would simultaneously avoid unnecessarily extending his supply lines and prevent using a portion of his combat power to secure these lines. Last, Kluck would ease the strain on 2nd and 3rd Armies. Bülow and Hausen would not need to massively extend their lines to maintain contact with 1st Army. They could concentrate their lines and better prevent any French and British attempts to counterattack and break through their formations.

¹⁰² Kluck, 76.

Kluck decided to change the direction of his army to move east of Paris on 31 August (see figure 2). He made the decision himself without a direct order from OHL or Bülow to do so. Kluck followed his decision by sending a message to OHL informing them of his decision to change direction from southwest to south. The reply from OHL said, “The movement begun by the First Army is in accordance with the wishes of the Supreme Command.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Ibid., 84.

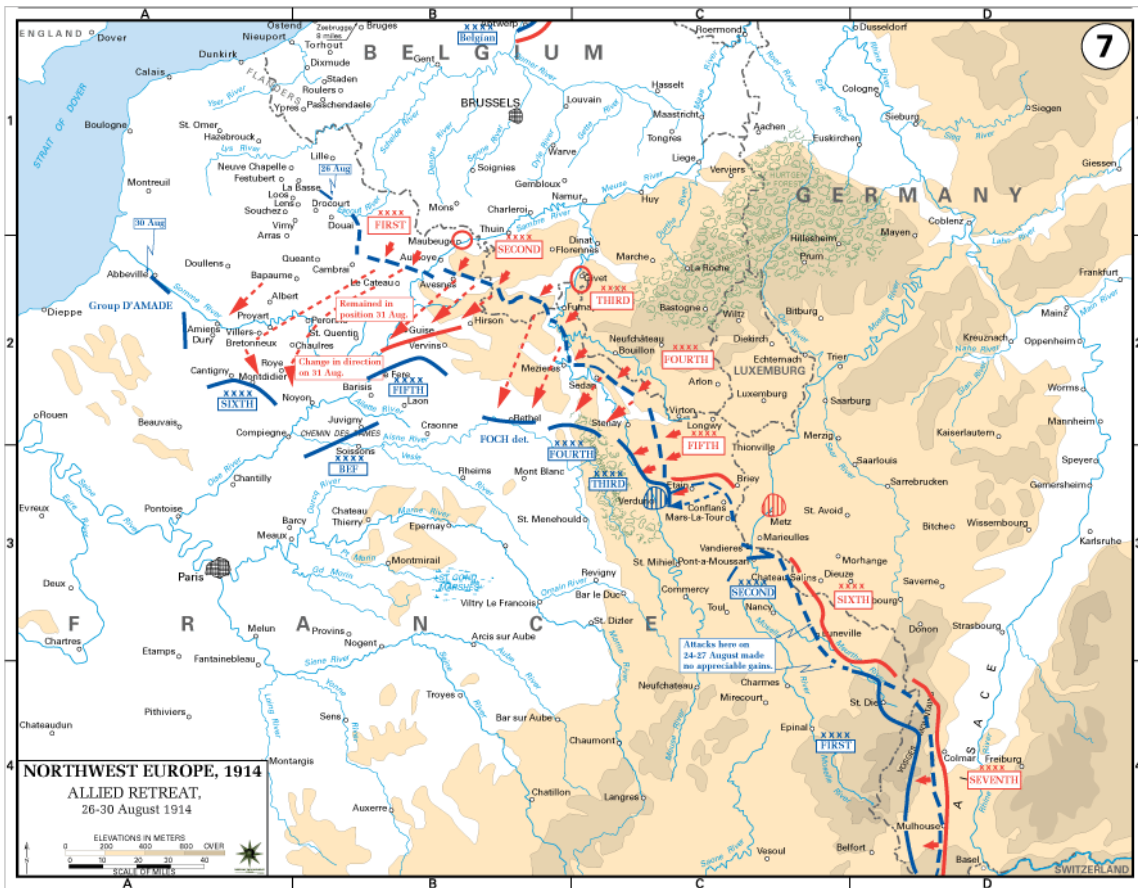


Figure 2. 1st Army change of direction 31 August

Source: United States Military Academy West Point, “Northwest Europe, 1914–Allied Retreat, 26-30 August 1914,” Campaign Atlas to the Great War, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/sitepages/wwi.aspx>.

Kluck never mentioned Paris in his memoirs when discussing his decision to change direction. Rather than ignoring Paris, Kluck understood the focus of the operation was enemy based, not terrain based. He saw the enemy’s flank, and the envelopment of that flank, as far more important than Paris.

As a result of Kluck’s decision to move east of Paris, he maintained contact with both friendly and enemy elements. Bülow and Hausen could stop stretching their lines to

maintain contact with 1st Army. Kluck knew the enemy in front of his army was British and the flank of the Entente forces. The day after his order to change direction he stated, “The forces in front of the First Army, now known to be British, had retired . . . and the western flank of the French presumably through Soissons in a southerly direction.”¹⁰⁴ Not only did Kluck know what forces lay in front of him, but the direction they moved. He saw no indication that enemy forces were extending their lines further west or moving forces to strike his flank.

Logistically, he did not simplify the situation, but Kluck managed to prevent making logistics significantly more difficult. In his memoirs, Kluck discusses the logistics of the operation saying,

As a result of accumulated experience, helped by imagination, it gradually became clear to all that the constant preparedness of the Army and the maintenance of its strength depended to a very great extent on the efficiency and reliability of its trains and supply columns.”¹⁰⁵

He understood the importance of maintaining effective supply to maintain his troops. As a result of the decision to move east of Paris, supplies could more easily make it to the soldiers. In addition to the efficiency of the trains and supply column, he prevented committing more of his combat power to maintaining longer lines of communication.

Kluck exposed his flank to Paris. However, when Kluck made the decision, Joffre had not yet formed 6th Army nor did he have any way of knowing 6th Army could be forming. Kluck instead focused on finding the flank of the French and British forces that existed. Kluck had no way to know that Joffre would form 6th Army in Paris and attack

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 85.

his flank. Instead, Kluck understood the importance of maintaining the overall tempo of the operation as it attempted to encircle the French and British Armies. To inform Kluck of any possible attack from the east, he ordered II Cavalry Corps, Marwitz's corps, on 1 September to "remain on the right flank of the Army, and reconitre towards the north and northeast fronts of Paris and along the right bank of the Oise."¹⁰⁶

In respect to the command culture, this decision reflected the German army's desired method. OHL identified the possibility of changing the direction of the attack and let the commander decide the proper course of action. Kluck understood OHL's order and made the decision. He received no resistance to the decision and the entire right wing of the attack benefited from easier communication and coordination. Kluck's decision also fit within the idea of understanding the purpose of the operation. His goal was to find the flank of the French and British forces and envelop it.

Gap between 1st and 2nd Armies

Due to the situation involving the location of the French and British armies along with the results of Kluck's earlier decision to turn south versus continue southwest, OHL sent the following order on the night of 2 September, "The intention is to drive the French in a south-easterly direction from Paris. The First Army will follow in echelon behind the Second Army and will be responsible for the flank protection of the Armies."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 94.

While this order seemed to make sense to OHL, the positions of 1st and 2nd Armies complicated the matter. When Kluck and Bülow received the order, 1st Army found itself one day's march ahead of 2nd Army. Therefore, Kluck needed to decide which part of OHL's order was most important. He made his understanding clear in his memoirs by stating, "On the 3rd September the IX. and III. Corps were ordered to move in accordance with the instructions contained in the first sentence of the above-mentioned wireless order of the Supreme Command."¹⁰⁸ Based off his statement, Kluck felt the need to force the British and French southeast of Paris to be his main purpose. This purpose clearly matched his previous efforts to find the enemy's flank and envelop it. Kluck explained his reason for continuing forward as

if [1st Army] halted for two days so as to get in echelon behind the Second Army, the enemy's Higher Command would regain the complete freedom of action of which it had been deprived. Should the First Army hold back, the great success for which the Supreme Command was confidently striving by 'forcing the enemy in a south-easterly direction' could no longer be hoped for.¹⁰⁹

However, Kluck did not completely ignore the second half of the order. He moved 4th Reserve Corps, reinforced by a cavalry division from 2nd Cavalry Corps, 2nd Corps and a brigade of infantry expected to arrive from Brussels to perform flank security.¹¹⁰ This reinforcement of the flank represented a significant element of 1st Army's combat power.

Bülow, on the other hand, saw the second sentence of the order as the primary intent. He viewed Kluck's role as flank security as key. In his memoirs on the campaign he stated,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Thus the rearward echeloning of the 1st German Army for the security of the right Army flank ordered by [OHL] had resulted in a forward movement. In addition to this, the left flank corps of the 1st Army, instead of a southerly, was given a strictly southeast direction, insuch a manner, that the left flank corps (the 9th), placed itself completely in front of the [2nd Army] right flank corps (the 7th).

This was very annoying to the the 2nd German Army , as due to this, the 2nd Army was also crowded in another direction which it considered to not be correct.¹¹¹

Bülow clearly demonstrated his view of the order's intent and he showed how he felt 1st Army's newly assigned role as flank security as most important.

Bülow went on to discuss the effects of the overlap. The overlap between the left flank of 1st Army and the right flank of 2nd Army slowed his movement to prevent the two corps becoming entangled (see figure 3). The left flank also slowed to maintain contact with 3rd Army and prevent a gap between them. He found himself stretched between 1st Army to his right and 3rd Army to his left.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Bülow, 22.

¹¹² Ibid., 23.

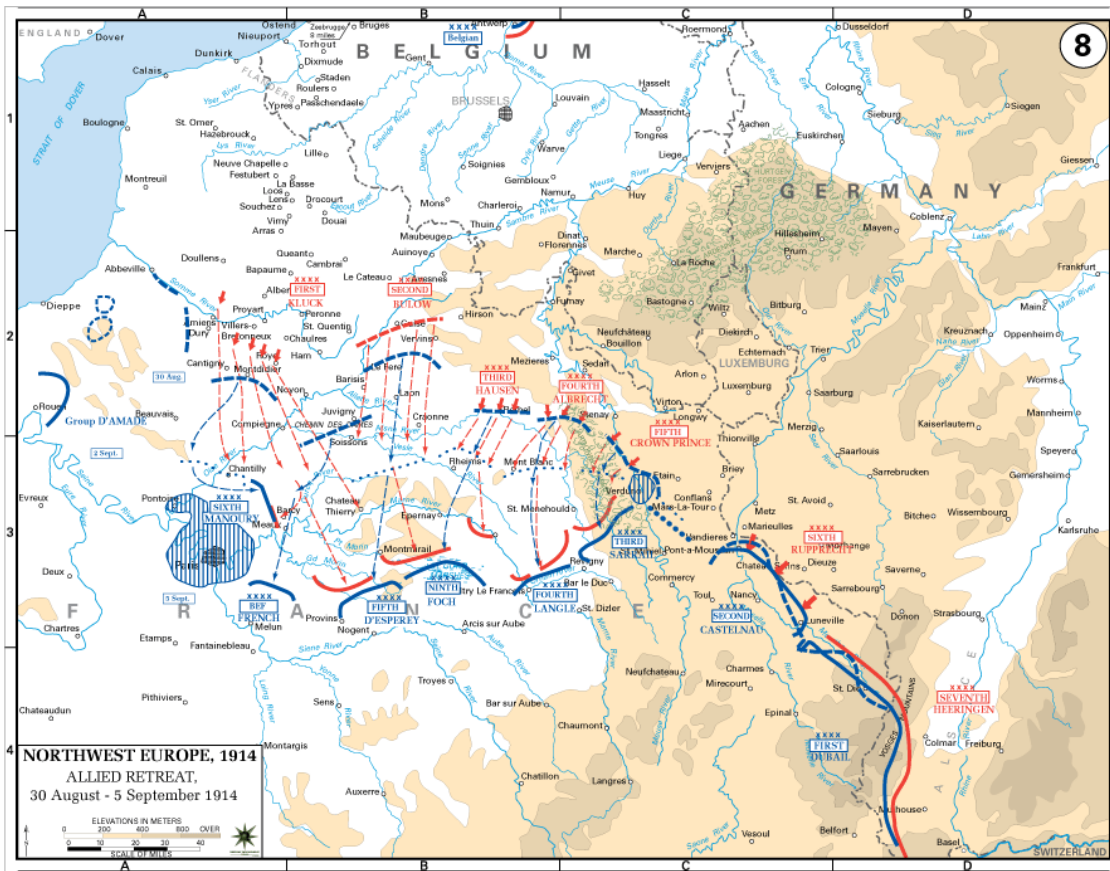


Figure 3. Overlap of 1st and 2nd Armies

Source: United States Military Academy West Point, “Northwest Europe, 1914–Allied Retreat, 30 August–5 September 1914,” Campaign Atlas to the Great War, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/sitepages/wwi.aspx>.

Kluck stopped his advance southeast based on two events. First, OHL sent an order, received on 5 September, directing,

The First and Second Armies are to remain facing the eastern front of Paris: the First Army between the Oise and the Marne, occupying the Marne crossings west of Château Thierry; the Second Army between the Marne and the Seine, occupying the Seine crossings between Nogent and Mery inclusive.”¹¹³

¹¹³ Kluck, 105.

At the time of the receipt of the order, only two corps and a cavalry division of 1st Army oriented west. 2nd Army, however, continued to be oriented south. The distance between OHL's headquarters in Luxembourg and 1st and 2nd Armies prevented OHL from having a clear picture of the current situation. The second event included a report from OHL, carried by Lietutenant Colonel Hentsch, about the relocation of French forces to Paris to attack from the east. Kluck then realized that his flank forces could not protect the flank of the right wing.¹¹⁴

On the night of 5 September, following the order from OHL and the report of strong forces in Paris, Kluck ordered his entire Army to reorient west toward Paris with II Cavalry Corps on his left flank between 1st and 2nd Army. Shortly after issuing the order, 4th Reserve Corps reported heavy contact on the flank. This report hastened Kluck's movement west.¹¹⁵

As Kluck responded to the French threat from Paris, he and Bülow discussed how to maintain contact between them. According to Bülow, he and Kluck agreed on the evening of 6 September to attach 1st Army's left two corps (3rd and 9th) to 2nd Army. Bülow tasked 9th Corps to link in with 2nd Army's right flank and 3rd Corps to protect 2nd Army's right flank. However, Kluck sent the following messages to Bülow the morning of 7 September:

- (1) Sent 10:10 a.m.: 'Second and Fourth Corps and Fourth Reserve Corps heavily engaged west of the lower Ourcq River. Where are the 3rd and 9th Corps? How the situation there? Answer urgently requested.'
- (2) Sent 11:15 a.m.: 'Attack of the 3rd and 9th Army Corps on the Ourcq River'

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 121.

urgently necessary. Enemy considerably reinforced. Request that corps be ordered to march in direction Le Ferte, Milon, and Crouy.’¹¹⁶

Whether or not Kluck and Bülow agreed to attach 3rd and 9th Corps to 2nd Army, the second message made clear the need to send them back to 1st Army. With the departure of 3rd and 9th Corps, Bülow found his right flank exposed. As a result of the French 5th and 9th Armies’ attacks against Bülow’s army, he could not reposition forces to reestablish contact with 1st Army and the gap between the two armies formed (see figure 4). Joffre soon ordered the attack to begin, and the BEF entered the gap.

¹¹⁶ Bülow, 23.

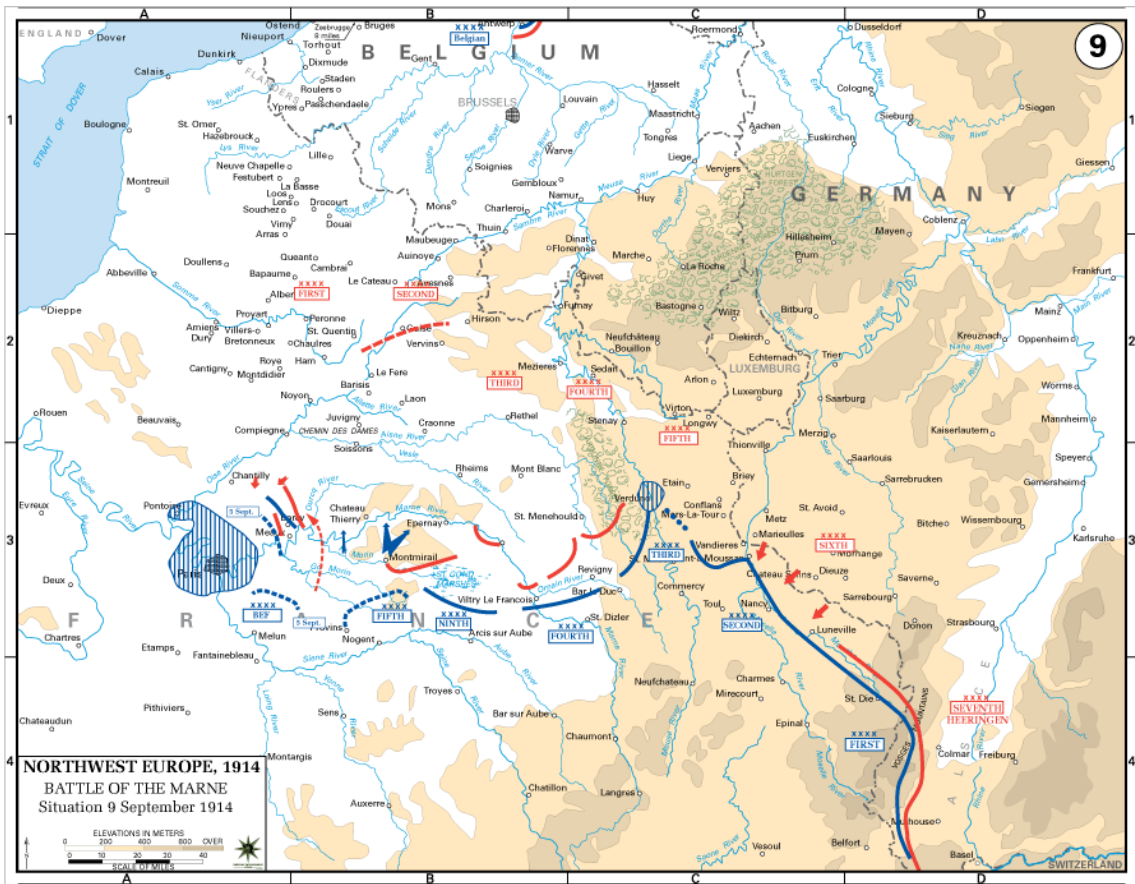


Figure 4. The gap between 1st and 2nd Armies

Source: United States Military Academy West Point, “Northwest Europe, 1914–Battle of the Marne, Situation 9 September 1914,” Campaign Atlas to the Great War, accessed November 10, 2014, <http://www.westpoint.edu/history/sitepages/wwi.aspx>.

The effect of decentralized operations and the German army culture show in a few important aspects. First, Kluck and Bülow clearly undertook the OHL order issued 2 September very differently. Kluck saw the most important aspect of the order to be the drive southeast. Bülow, however, found 1st Army’s assigned role as flank security of primary importance. Unless the armies both undertook the purpose of the order similarly, the decisions made by the commanders may not be complimentary. The actions that

followed demonstrated this point clearly as Kluck turned 1st Army southeast and Bülow displayed annoyance over the movement.

As in any operation, the headquarters needed an accurate understanding of the situation. With OHL located in Luxembourg and the transmission times lagging up to 20 hours, it had a delayed picture at best. Both the order on 2 September directing 1st Army to echelon behind 2nd Army while 1st Army was a day's march ahead and the 4 September order telling both 1st and 2nd Armies to continue oriented west demonstrate OHL's lack of situational understanding. Bülow himself stated that OHL needed to deconflict that actions of 1st and 2nd Army.

Additionally, rather than coordinate the actions of 1st and 2nd Armies, OHL stood silent in many cases. *Auftragstaktik* allowed the subordinate to make decisions based off of the situation, but the headquarters still needed to provide some guidance.

Next, the culture of the attack showed in the forming of the gap between 1st and 2nd Army. Kluck favored attacking southeast rather than transition to flank security. His army was in contact with the enemy and he continued to try to attack the enemy's flank. Bülow lamented 1st Army's turn southeast but stated, "1st Army also ordered for September 5, the further advance of all its corps. The enemy was to be attacked wherever found."¹¹⁷ He may have understood the order differently than Kluck, but he accepted the fact that the preferred course of action was attack. Also, as 1st Army became aware of the significant threat from the French 6th Army from Paris, Kluck could have ordered a retreat of his flank security forces to reestablish contact with the main body of 1st Army. This decision would have allowed 1st and 2nd Armies to maintain a continuous front.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 23.

Instead, Kluck repositioned his entire army west, leaving Bülow's flank exposed, and attacked. This decision fit directly in with the German army command culture of the attack.

Lieutenant Colonel Hentsch calls off the attack

As the French Army attacked all along the front, German forces attempted to fend off their attackers and continue the advance. Kluck continued his attack on the French 6th Army near Paris. Bülow continued fighting French 5th and 6th Armies, attempting to maintain contact with 3rd Army and protect his right flank that had lost contact with Kluck. Only Marwitz with two cavalry divisions, one infantry division, and one infantry brigade remained in the gap attempting to prevent the French and British from breaking through the German lines.

To gain situational awareness, Moltke sent Hentsch forward to the lines from OHL's position in Luxembourg. Moltke selected Hentsch due to his position as chief of intelligence as well as his better understanding of the situation, having been at the front three days earlier delivering the intelligence report to 1st Army about the French 6th Army in Paris. Moltke and Hentsch, along with a few other officers including Tappen, held a several meetings before his departure. As he left OHL, Hentsch understood he had the full authority to order a general retreat of the right wing if he found the situation required. Later, some officers later doubted Moltke granted Hentsch this authority.¹¹⁸ Whether or not Moltke meant to, Hensch departed for the staff tour believing he had such authority.

¹¹⁸ Herwig, 272.

Just after noon on 8 September, Hentsch departed OHL to visit the armies of the right wing, including 5th through 1st Armies. At 5th, 4th, and 3rd Armies, he found no need for concern. In fact, he added to a report from 3rd Army to OHL “Situation and outlook is absolutely favorable to the Third Army.”¹¹⁹ Hentsch continued his staff tour on 8 September, arriving at 2nd Army’s headquarters. At 2nd Army, he found its situation tenuous. Hentsch discussed the situation with Bülow, his chief of staff Colonel Otto von Lauenstein and a few other officers overnight. The next morning, Hentsch departed 2nd Army’s headquarters to convince 1st Army to maneuver east to reconnect with 2nd Army.¹²⁰

Bülow only mentioned his interaction with Hentsch briefly saying,

In agreement with the operative of [OHL] (Lt Col Hentsch), I was convinced that the most important mission of 2nd Army now was, to support the 1st German Army north of the Marne and to offer it the possibility to gain contact with the right flank of the 2nd Army in the direction of Fismes.¹²¹

He then stated that the 2nd Army continued to win across its entire front, but the situation dictated the need for him to retreat and make contact with 1st Army.

The next day, Hentsch arrived at 1st Army’s headquarters. He met with Kuhl, the chief of staff, and explained the situation. Protocol within the German army maintained that a general staff officer from OHL report to the General Staff of the field army, not the commander. In fact, he reported to each army’s General Staff before meeting with the commander. Kuhl and Hentsch knew each other well due to Hentsch working for Kuhl in

¹¹⁹ Max von Hausen, *Memoirs of the Marne Campaign*, trans. John B. Murphy, Unpublished, 256.

¹²⁰ Herwig, 273-274.

¹²¹ Bülow, 27.

the OHL Third Section (intelligence) just before the war.¹²² The two General Staff officers met and discussed the needed course of action. After arguing over the appropriate decision, Kuhl referred to the decision as such: “Hentsch then proceeded to the First Army and, in the name of the General Headquarters [OHL], ordered it to fall back also.”¹²³ Clearly Kuhl, in the end felt Hentsch spoke for OHL as he described Hentsch’s decision as “orders”, not a recommendation. Upon completion of the meeting with Kuhl, Hentsch left 1st Army’s headquarters to inform the other armies of the retreat. Hentsch never met with Kluck, the latter stated, “His arrival was only made know to the Army Commander after he had already hastily departed.”¹²⁴

After their meeting and Hentsch’s departure, Kuhl relayed the decision to Kluck.

The order from Hentsch included the following:

All the armies are to be moved back. . . . The First Army must therefore also retire in the direction [northeast].” Kluck went on to note that Hentsch himself drew the new lines for the armies on the map at 1st Army’s headquarters. Hentsch even went as far as “emphasiz[ing] the fact that these directions were to remain regardless of any other communications that might arrive and that he had full powers.”¹²⁵

Kluck then followed this order by ordering the retreat of his forces to behind the Aisne River. A staff lieutenant colonel thus called off the German advance in the Marne Campaign.

¹²² Herwig, 270.

¹²³ Hermann von Kuhl and Walter von Bergmann. *Movements and Supply of the German First Army During August and September, 1914* (Fort Leavenworth: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1929), 80.

¹²⁴ Kluck, 137.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

How could this happen? How could a staff lieutenant colonel order the withdrawal of multiple field armies and, in effect, the entire campaign? First, Hentsch represented more than a simple messenger from OHL. He had the ability and authority to evaluate the situation, make a decision, and implement that decision without needing to call back to OHL. Although Kuhl may have argued his opinion, Hentsch won out.

At first sight, OHL's decision to send an officer directly to field armies to instruct them what to do did not look like decentralized execution. However, Moltke authorized Hentsch, or at least Hentsch felt as though he had been, to make and implement decisions. He could evaluate the situation, determine what best to do, and implement that course of action. He made what he knew was a momentous decision and implemented it immediately. The empowerment of subordinates to make the proper decision, including staff officers, fit directly within the command culture of the German army.

Less important than Moltke's intention with Hentsch was the reactions the armies had to Hentsch. Whether or not Hentsch really had been authorized to make the decision, he felt Moltke had directed him to do just that. Not only did the armies follow the decisions of Hentsch, but they did so without so much as calling OHL on the radio or sending a representative back to OHL to argue the point. Even though 1st Army may not have had the time to do such a thing, 2nd Army did. Hentsch stayed the night at 2nd Army's headquarters and could have sent a car or even an airplane back to OHL.

Also within the command culture, Hentsch's status as a General Staff officer would earn him some instant credibility. Each of the armies could reasonably know who Hentsch was before his arrival, but he clearly operated within the General Staff system. As stated earlier, Hentsch reported first to the armies' chiefs of staff before possibly

talking to the commander. His discussions about the possibility of retreat took place with both Bülow and Lauenstein present in 2nd Army headquarters and with Kuhl alone at 1st Army. An officer not on the General Staff could not have influenced the situation in the ways Hentsch did.

Given the long developed Deployment Plan of 1914/15, the German army executed the Marne Campaign within its command culture with decentralized execution included in that culture. The culture of the attack, use of initiative by subordinates, mission type orders and the particular nature of the German General Staff all shaped the Marne Campaign.

First, the culture of attack could be seen in 1st Army's reaction to the threat from its right flank. Instead of moving away from Paris and linking in with 2nd Army's right flank, Kluck instead attacked toward the French 6th Army. He could have prevented the gap on the Marne, but doing so would have kept him from an attempt to attack and defeat the French 6th Army.

Next, the German army executed using initiative as evidenced by the actions of Kluck and Hentsch. Kluck made the decision to turn the entire German right wing to the east of Paris rather than continuing around to the west. He understood the enemy forces to be most important and adjusted 1st Army's direction in accordance with that understanding. Hentsch took the understanding he had of his instructions and carried them out as he saw fit. When he found a situation that confronted him with a hard decision, he made the decision instead of calling back for guidance from OHL. However, earlier in the campaign, OHL placed 1st Army under the command of 2nd Army. Bülow interfered with Kluck's initiative by directing the movement of individual corps under

Kluck's command. This order limited Kluck's option and hampered his ability to react to unforeseen possibilities.

All through the operation, the German army used mission type orders. Rather than give long instructions, units used short direct orders to tell their subordinates what to do. The orders did not direct how to do the dictated task. At times the German army failed, however, at creating a clear understanding across its field armies in those orders. For example, Kluck and Bülow saw the order of 4 September in different ways. Their reactions caused confusion amongst their formations. Mission type orders required shared understanding and this order caused the opposite.

Last, the emphasis of the General Staff officer could scarcely have been clearer. One General Staff lieutenant colonel travelled to five different armies in two days and made a pivotal decision. He made that decision after conferring with fellow General Staff officers rather than primarily with commanders. The armies followed the instructions given by that General Staff officer rather than push him aside. Hentsch's decision ended the German attack of the Marne Campaign, but preserved the German right wing to continue fighting later.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The attack in August and September failed to achieve a quick German victory in France. Instead, the German Army found itself in a protracted, largely static war, exactly what it attempted to avoid. Many different historians attribute the failure of the campaign on different reasons. For example, Martin van Creveld in his book *Supplying War* cites the logistical shortcomings of the campaign. Also, the actions of the French and British armies no doubt played a major part. They won a hard fought victory on the Marne River. The German Army did not hand it to them. However, what part did German command play in the success or failure of the Campaign?

The previous chapters examined the German Army command culture including the concept of *Auftragstaktik*, war planning, and the execution in the Marne Campaign. This chapter will discuss the overall factors that prevented the successful implementation of decentralized execution of the German Army in the campaign. The conclusions within this chapter will focus on the operational and tactical levels rather than the strategic.

The execution of the Marne Campaign demonstrated the difference between decentralized execution in the conceptual and the practical forms. The war plan, developed over years and the concept of *Auftragstaktik* failed to achieve victory on the battlefields of France in 1914. What overall themes prevented the maximum benefit of decentralized execution by the German Army in the Marne Campaign?

Key Leader Appointment

First, the concept of decentralized execution requires leaders of every echelon make decisions as the situation develops, especially when it varies from the expected. Therefore, selection of the right people to these positions becomes vitally important. Of the leaders discussed in the planning and execution of the Marne Campaign, Moltke the Younger stands out as particularly unfit for his position. Also, the choice to put Kluck and Bülow adjacent to each other proved costly.

The Kaiser himself appointed the Chief of the General Staff.¹²⁶ After appointment, Moltke himself doubted his ability to perform his assigned role. While some self doubt does not ensure failure, it gives an insight into Moltke's thoughts. During execution of the Marne Campaign, he continually failed to provide guidance and coordinate the actions of the different armies. Instead, he forced the armies coordinate actions amongst themselves. The lack of guidance from the higher headquarters made for an environment where the army commanders determined the best course of action without synchronization across the entire front, the right wing in particular.

In addition to his doubts and failure to provide guidance, Moltke's physical location also likely contributed to the failure of the campaign. In contrast to Joffre, who moved around the battlefield constantly in order to maintain awareness, Moltke stayed in the headquarters in Germany and later Luxembourg. By staying away from the lines, Moltke lost awareness of the current conditions along the front and thus, in turn, restricted any awareness of the situation to only the reports from the armies.

¹²⁶ Herwig, 42.

Besides Moltke, the selection of key personnel caused friction between commanders and general staff officers within the armies. The appointment of officers to positions other than the Chief of General Staff stayed within the purview of the Military Cabinet. This power extended to the placement of general staff officers within the armies. The Chief of the General Staff would also make his recommendations to the Kaiser, however, and the Kaiser made the final decisions.¹²⁷

This unusual process contributed to conflicting personalities in important positions, such as Kluck and Bülow. Kluck, seen as an aggressive officer, commanded the right flank army and clearly saw himself as the main effort. Bülow, conversely, held the reputation of being more cautious.¹²⁸ However, when OHL put 1st Army under the command of 2nd Army on 17 August, Bülow could easily have seen himself as the overall commander of the right wing and therefore, the main effort. The confusion and friction between Kluck and Bülow contributed greatly to the failure of the campaign.

Span of Control

The next factor which may have prevented successful execution of the Marne Campaign relates to span of control. At the initiation of World War I, OHL directly commanded eight separate field armies, seven in the west and one in the east. The large number of separate formations spread over hundreds of kilometers would make adequate control over these formations extremely difficult, even with today's communication equipment.

¹²⁷ Frank Bucholz, Janet Robinson, and Joe Robinson, *The Great War Dawning: Germany and its Army at the Start of World War I* (Vienna: Verlag Militaria, 2013), 116.

¹²⁸ Herwig, 118-119.

OHL may have realized the difficulty of synchronizing so many subordinate elements. As analyzed in the execution of the campaign, OHL placed 1st Army under the command of the 2nd Army commander, Bülow, from 17 to 28 August. This decision enabled a more unified command structure for the right wing of the attack, even though Bülow used that command relationship to micromanage the corps of 1st Army. Had OHL recognized the span of control issues during the planning phase, it could have instituted separate army group commanders of the the right wing, the center armies, and the left wing. This decision would have prevented the need for the OHL to maintain awareness of the seven separate armies along the western front while still commanding the army in the east fighting the Russians. As evidence of the need to reduce the span of control on the Western Front, OHL created the echelon of army group no later than 15 August 1915 under Crown Prince Wilhelm.¹²⁹ The army group could coordinate the actions between a smaller number of formations. OHL could then command a smaller number of army groups and enable better overall situational understanding.

Clarity of Purpose in Orders

The proper execution of decentralized execution through *Auftragstaktik* required that all subordinate elements understand their purpose within the assigned missions. If an order provided a clear purpose, the subordinate leader could adjust to changing situations while still contributing to the overall purpose. Without a clear purpose, the orders hinder the ability of subordinate leaders to make the best decisions in accordance with the intent.

¹²⁹ “Die deutschen Heeresgruppen Teil 1, Erster Weltkrieg” Das Bundesarchiv, last modified June 15, 2013, accessed November 17, 2014, https://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/bilder_dokumente/01077/index-4.html.de.

OHL's order on 5 September provided a great example of an order that lacked clarity of purpose for the subordinate elements. Kluck viewed the most important portion of the order to be the push of the British and French forces southeast, away from Paris. Bülow, however, found the assignment of 1st Army as flank security of the right wing to be the most important portion of the same order. An army that relied on subordinates understanding their purposes needed to ensure in its orders exactly what the purposes were at the time. Orders that lack clear, unmistakable guidance can cause confusion and desynchronize operations more than no order at all.

Communication Technology

As with any method of command, communication plays a vital role. The subordinate requires guidance from the higher headquarters and the higher headquarters requires accurate reporting of the situation from the subordinate. The combination of the two helps to synchronize operations to best achieve the assigned mission. Clear understanding of purpose allows the subordinate to better react to changing situations. Unclear purpose as well as enemy action only serve to make the mission even more chaotic. The technology at the time, particularly in the realm of communications, inhibited the ability of OHL to receive reports and issue orders in a timely manner.

First, the time required for an order to travel from sender to receiver inhibited communications. Due to the technological constraints of the time, each field army possessed only one radio set. All other communication to and from each army travelled through other methods including telegraph. The limited number of radio sets hampered effective passage of information considering each army contended with volume of traffic and range issues. By only having one radio set, armies had difficulty being able to relay

to adjacent units and OHL all of the needed information and receiving updates from OHL. Kluck acknowledged this drawback saying in his memoirs,

Constant touch could be maintained with the Second Army, both at the front and between the two headquarters; but with the Supreme Command [OHL] it was otherwise; through the breakdown of close communication, their orders to the rapidly moving First Army, which, during its wheel on the extreme flank of the Armies, had by far the greatest distance to cover, did not arrive till after the most important events had already begun.¹³⁰

Another issue slowing communication related to the location of OHL itself. By establishing the headquarters in Luxembourg, OHL needlessly lengthened communication distances. These distances caused the 20 hour delay from transmission from 1st Army to the receipt by OHL. Radio operators between the two locations needed to receive the transmission and then send it to next location. Many times the transmission needed to be resent for the receiving station to ensure the entire message had been received correctly, with operators needing to yell into the handset to be heard.¹³¹ How many of these stations could have been removed, resulting in valuable time saved, if OHL moved closer to the right wing? Logically by moving closer to the right wing, OHL would lengthen the transmission times to the left wing and especially 8th Army in East Prussia fighting the Russians. Due to the more fluid nature of the situation on the right wing, lengthening the distance to the left wing stands as a prudent risk. As for the lengthened lines of communication to 8th Army, more effective execution of the Marne Campaign and therefore more likely victory in France could only aid the fight against the

¹³⁰ Kluck, 109.

¹³¹ Correlli Barnett, *The Swordbearers: Supreme Command in the First World War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 67.

Russians. Also, the Eastern Front consisted of only one army and thus required less coordination.

Situational Understanding

The next aspect of communication unrelated to technology, but the content of the messages sent using that technology. Decentralized execution requires a unit to relay to both its adjacent units and higher headquarters the situation in its area. By doing so, all elements maintain awareness. When reports did not accurately convey the situation, the understanding across the entire front broke down.

The armies at least partially inflated the success of their operations with 2nd Army declaring “total victory” over the French 5th Army and 1st Army declaring it had “swept all opposing forces from the field of battle” on 30 August and 31 August respectively.¹³² Receiving these reports, OHL thought the campaign all but won. Without accurate reporting from the armies correctly stating the enemy situation, OHL could not understand the conditions along the front.

Due to the lack of an accurate understanding of the situation, OHL ordered the movement of two entire corps from the decisive right wing east toward Russia on 26 August. Based off of the reports OHL received, it seems to have felt that the right wing neared inevitable victory while the Eastern Front urgently needed the troops. Another example related to a breakdown of understanding again comes from the order of 5 September. OHL ordered 1st Army to echelon behind 2nd Army when 1st Army was

¹³² Herwig, 195.

located a full day of marching ahead of 2nd. The situation on the ground made execution of the order impractical at best.

In regards to lack of understanding, communications left the separate army commanders unaware of the situation with the other armies along the front. Kluck requested information from OHL on 3 September sending, “The First Army requests to be informed of the situation of the other Armies, whose reports of decisive victories have so far been frequently followed by appeals for support.”¹³³ Earlier reports clearly did not accurately portray the overall situation since Kluck felt the need to ask for an update. Later, on 6 September, Kluck received a report from OHL explaining the situation along the front “to the amazement of First Army Headquarters, who believed all the armies to be advancing victoriously.”¹³⁴ Had Kluck understood the situation along the entire front, he may have made different decisions as his Army neared the Marne River.

Culture of Attack

The culture of attack also inhibited the execution of decentralized execution. For example, with a 50 km gap between 1st and 2nd Armies, Kluck attacked west toward Paris enlarging the gap even more rather than moving east to regain contact with Bülow and 2nd Army. Why would Kluck do such a thing? Possibly, Kluck relied on the concept of finding the enemy and attacking him wherever he was. He recorded his thoughts, saying, “Should the pursuit be stopped, he [the French and British] would be able to halt

¹³³ Kluck, 98-99.

¹³⁴ Ibid.,107.

and regain freedom of maneuver, as well as an offensive spirit.”¹³⁵ Kluck’s decision to attack the French Sixth Army fit into the command culture of the attack. Of course, individuals have their own personalities even within culture. As discussed earlier, Kluck happened to be known for his aggressiveness even within the German Army. As difficult as self awareness can be, Kluck’s understanding of his own preference for attack may have allowed him to better evaluate the situation. After that evaluation, he may have seen the need to tie back in to the right flank of 2nd Army rather than attack toward Paris. Although culture takes long periods of time to adjust, a commander or staff officer could increase his or her options simply by remaining aware of the cultural bias of the organization. That awareness could open up options the commander or staff may not have considered before.

Adjustment

If a technique fails to provided the expected results, how long should an organization continue with that technique? By sending Hentsch forward on 8 September with the understood authority to direct the actions of the armies, did Moltke acknowledge the failure of decentralized execution? Moltke never stated his lack of belief in decentralized operations. It seems as though he simply accepted a lack of situational awareness. By sending Hentsch forward, he attempted to regain understanding. If Moltke indeed granted Hentsch the authority command the armies, it may have been an understanding of the failure of the communication system and an attempt at improving reaction time of OHL’s decisions due to a perilous situation.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 106.

Summary

In conclusion, the concept of decentralized execution, itself developed due to the inevitability of changing situations in war, proved difficult to execute effectively on the modern battlefield. The German Army could have effectively executed the campaign in a decentralized fashion, but the pitfalls discussed above needed to be addressed during education and training of leaders. By not properly executing these aspects of the operation, decentralized execution contributed to the failure of the Marne Campaign.

The decentralized execution issues the German Army faced in the Marne Campaign suggest possible struggles the United States Army faces in Mission Command. As the United States inculcates Mission Command as its desired command methodology with many of the same concepts as *Auftragstaktik*, the same issues may arise. The United States Army will only effectively conduct decentralized execution through awareness of and deliberate reconciliation of the same issues the German Army faced in 1914.

Possible future research may evaluate the French command methodology and its effects on during the same campaign. Joffre took extraordinary action to prevent disaster for France on the Marne. He moved around the front constantly during which he replaced ineffective commanders, shifted forces, and organized counterattacks.¹³⁶ Further research could analyze the doctrine and command culture of the French Army leading up to the beginning of World War I. This analysis could determine if Joffre and other French commanders followed their established command methodology and its effects. Did that established methodology prevent the destruction of the French Army in 1914 or did the leaders abandon it?

¹³⁶ Herwig, 310-311.

The German Army, the innovators of the concept of decentralized execution codified in *Auftragstaktik*, failed to effectively implement it. In fact decentralized execution added confusion and desynchronized the German attack. After more than 50 years of evolution, the areas discussed above proved too difficult. Only through reconciling the issues of key leader appointment, span of control, clarity of purpose in orders, communications technology, situational understanding, and a culture of attack could the German Army effectively execute decentralized execution through *Auftragstaktik*.

GLOSSARY

Aufmarsch. The concept of a detailed deployment plan that enabled the German Army to quickly assemble, equip, and transport its forces to assigned positions for the beginning of military operations.

Auftragstaktik. The German Army command methodology by which the army could react better to changing battlefield conditions through the use of mission-type orders to create shared understanding and allow disciplined initiative.

Command Culture. The institutional environment within which a commander operates and the accepted norms wherein the commander makes decisions

Decentralized Execution. Delegation of execution authority to subordinate commanders.

getrennter Heeresteile. The concept of keeping armies on different routes and only converging to execute the desired attack.

Kesselschlacht. Literally translated as “cauldron battle” where German Army forces aimed to completely surround enemies to then destroy them.

Oberste Heeresleitung. The German Supreme Headquarters

Umgehung. The concept of bypass or encirclement where German Army forces would encircle the enemy to destroy them.

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