

Pre-war Military Planning (Germany)

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Summary

With the Schlieffen Plan, the Great General Staff developed a detailed deployment and offensive plan that was supposed to avoid the dilemma of a two-front war. This planning resulted from the recognition that a long war of attrition should be prevented. For decades, and in Germany in particular, the debate about the war of the future had been intensely pursued. The German military leadership therefore took note of the change in war technology and operations management and drew conclusions from it. Regardless of this, military planning and the interaction between the military and politics in Germany showed a number of serious deficits that became obvious during the First World War.

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Armaments and War Planning in Their Political Dimensions

Planning for a future war was the task of the German General Staff. It worked out the deployment and operation plans, collected news about the armies of the major European powers, and evaluated past wars. In the event of war it was intended to lead the troops. In times of peace, however, the German General Staff occupied the weakest position within the military decision-making hierarchy and thus had little influence on the organization of the army. Its organization and armament was designed by the Prussian War Ministry. The Reich Chancellor was responsible for this, and his authority to issue guidelines also included the military administration. The constitution provided for the emperor to coordinate all areas of the military, but his actual influence was limited.

From the late 1890s onwards, internal military discussions about [armaments policies](#) were determined by the antagonism between the General Staff and the War Ministry.¹ While the General Staff pushed for a quantitative expansion of the army, the War Ministry showed reluctance, observing the requirements of the chancellor. As a result, a large number of conscripts were not drafted at all. In the 1890s, [Germany](#), with a population 50 percent larger than [France](#), had a smaller standing army.² In the first decade of the 20th century especially, when arming the navy became a dominant issue in domestic politics, the Reich's leadership under [Bernhard von Bülow \(1849-1929\)](#) and [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) viewed the army's budget primarily as a maneuvering measure to force the implementation of its domestic and financial interests in the *Reichstag*.

Germany's strategic position had deteriorated since the 1890s. The central problem of German military planning was the danger of a two-front war with France and [Russia](#). Just a few years after the Franco-Prussian War, Field Marshal [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#), who served as Chief of the General Staff until 1888, considered such a war inevitable. The more the German Reich under [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) brought itself into foreign political isolation, the more obvious this dilemma in German war planning became. [Naval armament](#), which had been massively expanded since 1898, exacerbated the situation. It not only withdrew considerable resources from land forces' budgets, but ultimately also enabled a three-front war with [Great Britain](#). As early as 1905, the General Staff began to include Britain in its planning.³ The [decade prior to 1914](#) was marked by a series of diplomatic crises that increased the risk of war. In light of this situation, the [Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911](#) gave Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg the impetus to rethink the previous arms policy and to call on the War Ministry to expand armament measures. This triggered a turnaround in military armament accompanied by demands from the chief of the General Staff as well as radical [nationalist](#) advocates for armament. As a result, the army laws of 1912 and 1913 significantly increased the size of the German army.

A look at the design of German military armament before 1914 clearly shows the [primacy of political leadership](#) in the form of the Reich Chancellor, who in turn was guided by longterm domestic and [financial](#) considerations. The War Ministry essentially acted as an instrument of political leadership. Nevertheless, the chief of the General Staff repeatedly exceeded the powers assigned to him, and tried meddling in political questions. This is especially true of his repeated calls for a preventive war. Field Marshal von Moltke had put forward such requests to [Otto von Bismarck \(1815-1898\)](#) in 1875 and 1887. [Alfred Graf von Schlieffen's \(1833-1913\)](#) preventive war demand from 1905 was probably the reason for his dismissal soon afterwards.⁴ If the political leadership was able to dismiss such requests without problems, the real threat to the primacy of politics arose above all from the General Staff's war

planning: Schlieffen incorporated the violation of [Belgian](#) and [Dutch neutrality](#) into his operational plans. His successor, [Helmuth von Moltke the Younger \(1848-1916\)](#), cancelled the Great Eastern Deployment (Großer Ostaufmarsch) in 1913, in effect preventing Germany from waging war against Russia without waging war against France first. Such measures by the General Staff led [Gerhard Ritter \(1888-1967\)](#) in the 1950s to assume a fateful contrast between *Staatskunst* and *Kriegshandwerk* in Germany.⁵ In fact, however, the political leadership explicitly gave its approval to the planning of operations and thus voluntarily submitted to the authority of the military in this regard. As little as the Reich's leadership was prepared to tolerate political encroachments by the General Staff in peacetime, it accepted its implicit influence on politics via war planning as well as its primacy in a future war.

Mentality in Society and the Military

The military enjoyed an outstanding social position in Prussia and Germany. The unification of Germany in 1871 had been achieved through military victories, which had significantly increased the reputation of the military in society. Additionally, the military performed functions of social integration. The *Gesinnungsmilitarismus* (militarism of sentiment) that was widespread in the German Empire can be characterized as the adaptation of military thought patterns in civil society, so that [militarism](#) developed beyond the military as an institution. This phenomenon includes radical nationalist associations such as the *Deutscher Wehrverein* (German Defense League), which since 1912 had been loud advocating and agitating for a massive expansion of the army. It positioned itself in direct opposition to the Prussian War Ministry and the [Reich's government](#) and stood for a war-affirming Social Darwinist view of the world, which considered struggle as a principle of life.

[Social Darwinism](#) and cultural pessimism had spread throughout Europe and America in the years before the First World War and had also found supporters in the German military.⁶ There, such currents became increasingly virulent the more Germany's strategic position deteriorated. The General Staff perceived the considerable progress in Russian arms build-up by 1910 as particularly threatening. This real concern was mixed with the topos of the insurmountable opposition between Germanism and Slavism, which presented an ideological exaggeration of the conflict that had been fostered since the [Balkan Wars in 1912/13](#), especially in the German and Russian media. Offensive warmongering positions such as those of the retired general [Friedrich von Bernhardi \(1849-1930\)](#), who in his book *Germany and the next War*, published in 1912, projected Germany's future as either one of "world power or decline", were not, however, representative of the German military leadership.⁷ Instead, a growing fatalism developed in the General Staff, which considered an imminent war to be inevitable. In particular, Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke the Younger was

increasingly filled with doubts and fears when he looked to the future.⁸

War Image and Concepts in the Military

In regards to the German operational planning for the expected war on two fronts there were clear premises set out under Schlieffen and Moltke: a powerful offensive should end the war on the [Western Front](#) as soon as possible so that the entire field army could then be turned towards the east. Schlieffen himself was convinced that France could be defeated within a few weeks. Within the German military leadership before 1914 however, it was by no means undisputed whether the *short* war dogma could be implemented. Schlieffen's successor, Moltke, also had doubts and was ultimately convinced of a *long* war regardless of the Schlieffen Plan's implementation, which he had furthered. Leading German military theorists of the time such as [Colmar von der Goltz \(1843-1916\)](#) and [Wilhelm von Blume \(1835-1919\)](#) both expected a *long* war. Regardless, the idea that a war waged by millions of soldiers must be short found a broad following not only among Schlieffen and his students in the General Staff, but also in the Prussian War Ministry. The question of the war's expected duration was of great importance and could not be underestimated. A *long* war would have required far greater supplies and production capacities for [food](#) and [ammunition](#). Unlike his predecessor, Moltke was looking to enforce long-term stockpiling, but his plans were foiled by the responsible war ministry. There, it was assumed that in view of the sensitivity of modern [economic](#) life, the party that was defeated in the early phase of the war would refrain from continuing the struggle. Nonetheless, all sides agreed that the next war would be marked by terrible destructiveness. This realization alone necessitated maximum efforts to shorten the war.⁹ The only way out of the dilemma seemed to be the greatest possible "violence in warfare". This implied the most powerful and swift offensive possible, such as Schlieffen had planned for France. Regardless of the immense increases of firepower in modern [weapons](#), a true "cult of the offensive" established itself, which was not only widespread in Germany but also in the other European armies.¹⁰ While there were very different views within the German military leadership about the question of the war's duration, there was no disagreement about the need for a strong offensive.

The question of the source of the offensive's power was controversial. Did it come mainly from a large number of troops or rather from the high quality of these troops? The discussion about the expansion of the German army before 1914 largely revolved around the question of quality or quantity. The operational plans developed by Alfred Graf von Schlieffen with their basic assumption of a short and offensively waged war placed great importance on the quality of the army. In order to achieve his ambitious operational goals, he required the youngest, best-trained and best-[equipped](#) troops. But since quantitative superiority was a

basic requirement for the offensive, Schlieffen endeavored, albeit tentatively, to simultaneously increase the size of the standing army. When this was rejected, he instead called for the number of reserves to be increased.

Two uncompromising supporters of the quality principle in the Prussian War Ministry were War Ministers [Heinrich von Goßler \(1841-1927\)](#) and [Karl von Einem \(1853-1934\)](#). They were concerned that reserve troops watered down the line army and thus damaged the effectiveness of their own troops. This concern was widespread among German military writers and the measures taken by the war ministry prior to the First World War were primarily characterized by a qualitative strengthening of the army.¹¹ With regard to war formations, this meant that they were based on the largest possible number of permanent cadres. At the start of the war, the German army had the strongest battalion cadres in Europe. Further focus of the advocates of “quality” lay on improving training, equipment and weapons.

As early as the 1880s and 1890s there had been attempts align the size of the army to the growth in population. The book *Das Volk in Waffen*, written by Colmar von der Goltz in 1883, warned that a future war would require a full mobilization of the people.¹² Nevertheless, for political as well as for military reasons described above, there was no significant increase in the army’s peace or war strength. At the end of 1912, however, Chief of Staff von Moltke gave up his previous reluctance and began, under the influence of [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#), to demand a massive quantitative armament of the German army. These demands arose primarily from the strong Russian armaments measures, which increasingly thwarted German war plans. Moltke’s pessimistic assumption of a long war also played a role. Such a war would soon have taken on the character of a [war of attrition](#), in which the ability to mobilize all resources would ultimately prove decisive. In the two years before the outbreak of war, the General Staff became a vocal advocate of the principle of quantity. Moltke and Ludendorff saw the coming war as a people’s war that would be fought in the form of a *guerre à outrance* and would therefore require the greatest possible mobilization.

Changing Warfare

The decades before the First World War were marked by a rapid change in military [technology](#), in regards to both weapons systems as well as means of [transportation](#) and [communication](#). The list of new inventions, some of which were groundbreaking, is long: These include smokeless powder, small-caliber multi-loading [rifles](#), [machine guns](#), [Rapid fire field pieces](#) and high explosive [grenades](#), as well as field telephones, motor vehicles and [aircraft](#). These innovations gave [warfare](#) a completely new material basis and consequently also changed the image of war and [military planning](#). The question of how the German

military leadership reacted to these developments, whether by adapting or persisting, has been widely discussed.

In the late 1920s, [Eckart Kehr \(1902-1933\)](#) put forward the theory that the German army prior to 1914 was primarily guided by the principle of stabilizing the political system against social democracy.¹³ This theory was taken up once again in the 1970s and 1980s. The importance of domestic political factors for armament have often been greatly exaggerated. In his international comparative study on the image of war, Dieter Storz was able to clearly demonstrate the German military leadership's basic focus on efficiency.¹⁴

In this sense, the German military leadership, like the French, adopted the technical developments of their time.¹⁵ The distrust in technical progress expressed at the time did nothing to change this. Rather, the military rose to the challenge and adapted their tactics to the changed circumstances. The [Russo-Japanese War](#), as a positional war waged with modern weapons, was particularly well received by the Germans. Despite their immense losses, the victory of the aggressively advancing [Japanese](#) seemed to confirm the widely held belief in an offensive doctrine. It also led to Germany significantly expanding the field army's heavy artillery in order to effectively combat opponents' strong defensive positions.¹⁶ The German army increasingly focused on aspects of [reconnaissance](#), mobility and firepower.¹⁷ The [infantry](#) regulations of 1906 and mission-type tactics were answers to questions raised by [new developments in warfare](#). The fact that fighting morale and will were given decisive importance was, at the same time, neither an expression of conservative insistence nor of hostility to technology. Rather, this factor appeared to be the only way out of the uncertainties which had arisen through the mechanization of warfare. The First World War showed that morale was still of great importance in an industrialized war.¹⁸

Army Operational Planning

Before the First World War, German operational planning was determined by the Schlieffen Plan. One hundred years later, the work of Terence Zuber¹⁹ triggered an intense debate about the character of the Schlieffen Plan as an actual war plan. Zuber's interpretation of Schlieffen's operation plans as completely flexible ("there never was a 'Schlieffen Plan'") and basically defensive met with opposition in large parts of historical research community. The controversy led to an in depth examination of war planning under Schlieffen and Moltke, whereby previously unknown sources were found and overall knowledge of German operational planning expanded and became more sophisticated.²⁰

Schlieffen himself wrote the memorandum, later known as the Schlieffen Plan, the result of many years of deliberation, in December 1905 as a legacy for his successor. In view of the expected war on two fronts, he planned an attack on France via Belgium and the Netherlands whereby the German armies would bypass the French fortress belt. His plan also entailed annihilating the French army southwest of Paris around forty days after mobilising in order to quickly turn the troops towards the East against Russia. Due to geography, a quick victory only seemed possible in France. The second part of the Schlieffen Plan, war on the Eastern Front, was never elaborated.²¹ The precise advance planning of every single day's destination made the war appear as a war by timetable.²² The plan was based on circumstances in 1905, when the Russian army was massively weakened by defeat and [revolution](#).

Schlieffen's successor Moltke took over these basic plans, but, as recent research has highlighted, modified them in such a way that the war plan applied in 1914 was consequently referred to as the Moltke plan. Moltke strengthened the troops intended for the defense of Alsace-Lorraine by eight newly established divisions and also expanded the [fortifications](#) in East Prussia. Unlike Schlieffen, he was not ready to surrender German territory. Moltke also removed the Netherlands from the deployment plans so that it could be used as an economic windpipe for a blockaded Germany. Considering that British participation in the war was at this point impossible to rule out, it is clear that Moltke did not expect a short war. In return, given the narrowed deployment corridor in Belgium, he had to plan an early coup on the Lüttich (Liège) fortress, which further diminished diplomatic opportunities. From about 1910 onwards, according to the German intelligence services, it was evident that the Russians were able to increase the speed of their mobilization.²³ This thwarted one of the basic and essential assumptions of the Schlieffen Plan and greatly alarmed the German General Staff. According to their calculations, the Russians would, by 1917 at the latest, reach a strength that would dwindle any prospects for a German victory. Pressure on the General Staff to increase the German forces' war strength thereafter increased significantly. Furthermore, a fatalistic attitude set in. This may best be expressed in Moltke's own words about a possible future war, which he stated in December 1912: "the sooner, the better".

Concepts of the Navy

In connection to its foreign policy reorientation towards "world politics", the Reich in 1898 began to massively arm their Imperial Navy (Kaiserliche Marine). Under the influence of [Alfred \(1849-1930\)](#) it was redesigned, not as a cruiser fleet to be operated overseas, but primarily as an ocean-going fleet with battleships destined for the North Sea. The redesign was influenced by a concept of risk (Risikogedanke) developed by Tirpitz and fixed itself on the world's strongest [sea power](#), Great Britain. The aim was to strengthen the German [High](#)

[Seas Fleet](#) (Hochseeflotte) to such a degree that in the event of a war, the Royal Navy would suffer such losses, that even if it emerged victorious, it would lose its position of dominance at sea. The questionable political calculation behind this strategy assumed that Great Britain would thereby be forced to accept Germany's foreign policy ambitions. As a matter of fact, it did the opposite.²⁴ In the undesirable event of war with Britain, Tirpitz envisaged a decisive battle near Heligoland, on which he concentrated all war preparations, disregarding any other strategies.²⁵ His ideas were based on the assessment that the Royal Navy would pursue an offensive doctrine and erect a tight blockade off the German North Sea coast. In 1912 however, the British admiralty started planning for a long-range blockade in the English Channel and near Scotland, thereby undermining the foundation of Tirpitz' plan. In 1913, the head of the German admiralty's staff, [Hugo von Pohl \(1855-1916\)](#), laid out an alternative scenario in which the German fleet would attack the Royal Navy in a defensive position in British waters. The result of this war game was the annihilation of the German fleet.²⁶ This showed, that German plans had become obsolete politically as well as militarily. But an alternative plan was never developed. Only [submarines](#) and mine ships appeared to be an effective tool against a British long-distance blockade, but Tirpitz had long prevented increasing their number. When war broke out in 1914, the Imperial Navy was thus left without a strategic concept for its High Seas Fleet. And despite the [British naval blockade](#) and its effects on Germany, the fleet was forced to remain in a defensive position. Significant strategic support for German land [warfare](#) by the [naval](#) forces was not planned.

Conclusion

Examining German considerations and plans for a future war reveal a complex picture: On the one hand, it is evident that the basic outline and shape of a future war could quite accurately be predicted by evaluating other contemporary wars. Great illusions about the war were certainly not rampant.²⁷ The German military elites reacted to developments with pioneering steps. The creation of heavy artillery for the field army and the adjustments to the infantry regulations are proof of this. At the same time, the Germans tried to overcome the uncertainties of the coming war by planning as meticulously as possible. Schlieffen and Moltke did not want to leave anything to chance. This fixation on a detailed operational plan however, resulted in a lack of flexibility. The dynamics of the war and its volatile nature were not taken into account.²⁸ Also future opponents were underestimated.²⁹ What is particularly striking is the discrepancy between careful deployment planning on the one hand and the lack of overall war planning on the other. This includes glaring flaws in economic war planning. Above all, however, there were no considerations whatsoever about the interaction between the army and the navy. The navy itself lacked its own strategic concept. On top of

that, coordination with Germany's ally [Austria-Hungary](#) was poor.³⁰ One of the main reasons for these inadequacies was the constitutional structure of the [empire](#): Apart from the emperor, there was no coordinating body for military, political and economic warfare. And the emperor was completely overwhelmed by his role as supreme warlord.

When the war, for which the General Staff had meticulously prepared for so long, broke out in 1914, it took six weeks and the [Battle of the Marne](#) before the prospect of a quick victory fell apart. In addition to a lack of communication, it was the lack of divisions and the severe exhaustion of the troops that led to the offensive being abandoned. What followed corresponded to the scenario that the German military leadership had long [imagined](#) as the worst possible outcome for a coming war: years of positional warfare and attrition.

Oliver Stein, Bayerisches Armeemuseum

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