

Alfred von Schlieffen (c. 1911)

Abstract

Alfred von Schlieffen (1833-1913) had a long and distinguished military career, having fought as an officer in both the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. In 1891, he replaced Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891) as Chief of the General Staff of the German Army. Fear of a two-front war with France and Russia, particularly after France's signing of an *Entente Cordiale* with Great Britain in 1904, led Schlieffen to devise a military strategy against encirclement. The Schlieffen Plan, as it came to be known, proposed the swift defeat of France in a scythe-like maneuver through Belgium and Holland, with the goal of cutting Paris off from the sea. The bulk of the German army was to focus on defeating France while a much smaller contingent was to keep the slowly mobilizing Russians at bay in the east.

Schlieffen died a year before the outbreak of the First World War. He was thus unable to experience the eventual failure of his famous plan. The Germans did not anticipate the strong resistance of the Belgian army, the arrival of the British Expeditionary Forces in France, or the Russian army's sudden advance into East Prussia. The result was a German retreat, the building of a line of trenches from the North Sea to the Swiss border, and a long war of attrition. Admittedly, Schlieffen's successor, Helmuth Johann Ludwig von Moltke (1848-1916), had modified the plan by weakening the right wing in the west in favor of sending more troops to the east. Thus, the original version of the Schlieffen Plan was never fully implemented. In any event, Schlieffen's theories, as described in his book *Cannae*, became standard reading at military academies in Europe and the United States after the First World War and are said to have influenced the German *blitzkrieg* doctrine in the Second World War.

Source



Source: Postcard, 1911-1913. Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin

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