



(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Imperial German Army Col. Gen. Alexander von Kluck (fifth from the left) and his First Army staff, autumn 1914

Six Weeks in 1914

Campaign Execution and the Fog of War—Historical Lessons for the Military Professional

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World War I in general and the so-called First Battle of the Marne in particular are still relevant to military operations today. There are many lessons that the modern military professional can draw from the first six weeks of the war, which was fought mainly between German forces and those of the allied French and British. Among the most important of these is that even if an army

espouses mission command in its culture and doctrine, it can execute it poorly or in a manner that could make the methodology not only ineffective, but also counterproductive.

The first Marne campaign was unique and paradoxical since it was a strategic loss for Germany in a situation where German forces won almost every tactical engagement. Analyzing how this happened offers

key insights that are relevant to our armed forces today, particularly as they may apply to analysis and employment of the *mission command* concept.

Background of the Campaign

The designation “First Battle of the Marne” is in fact a misnomer; there was no decisive battle. It was rather a series of numerous skirmishes and several separate battles fought between Imperial German Army and Anglo-French forces along the Ourcq, Petit Morin, Grand Morin, and Aisne Rivers in northwestern France (see figure 1).

To avoid the German High Command’s worst nightmare scenario of a two-front war, the key initial objective for the opening German operation was to knock France out of the conflict as quickly as possible so Germany could then turn its attention toward Russia in the east. As a result, at the outset of the war

in early August, the Germans deployed rapidly, advancing through neutral Belgium in an effort to envelop the French and British forces preparing to advance against the Germans. As part of this operation, the German army had assembled a force of heavy artillery guns to quickly reduce the Belgian and French fortresses in the path of their advance.

In contrast, the French plan at the start of the war was basically to attack wherever their forces could destroy German forces, depending for success on *élan* and their belief in the natural superiority of the French soldier.

The German Offensive

The German invasion started 2 August 1914 and extended to early September. In the beginning, most things went right for the Germans and most went wrong for the French. After reducing the fortress of

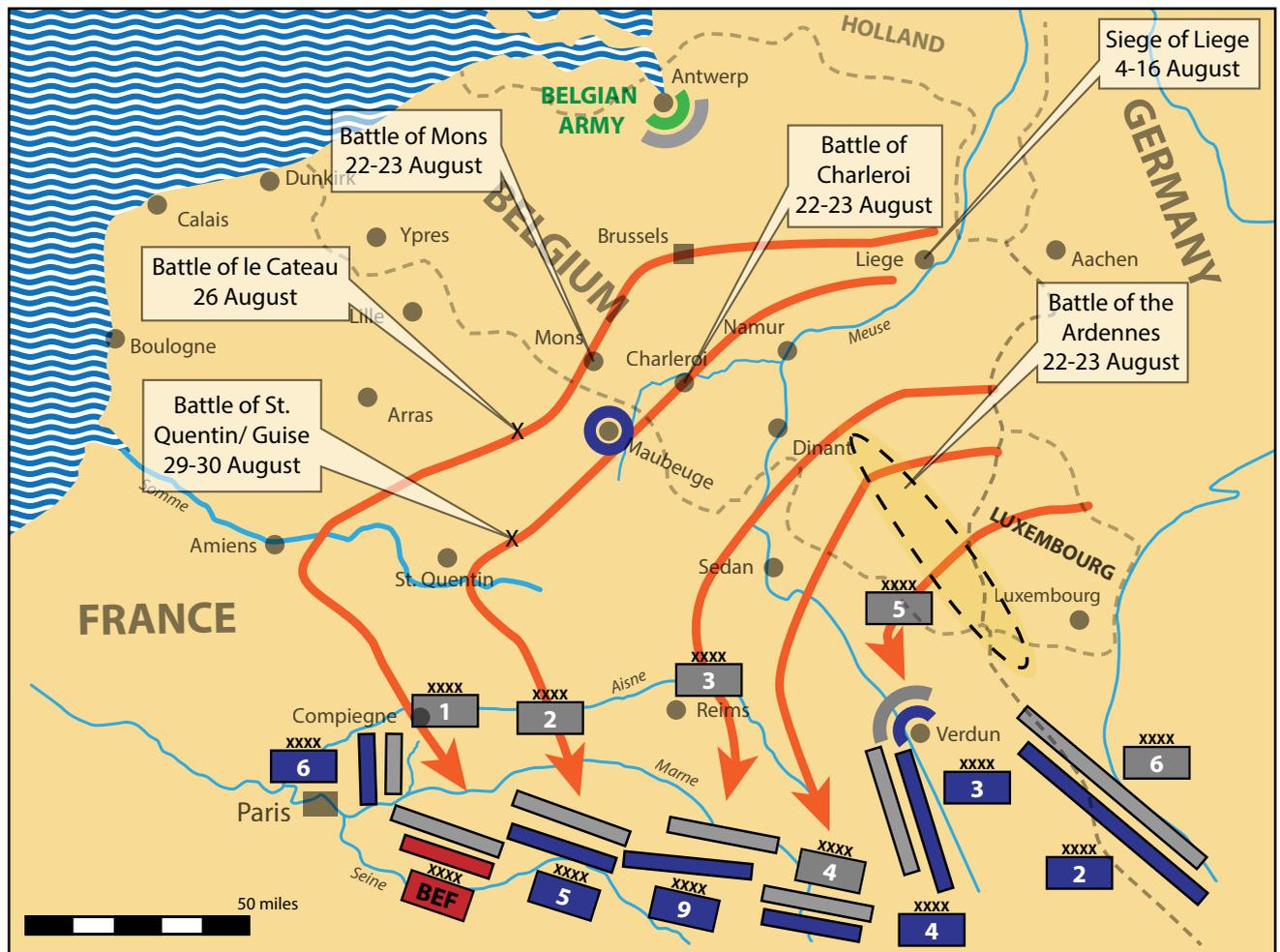


Figure 1. The First Marne Campaign

Liege on 16 August, the German forces successfully began their sweeping advance through Belgium, aiming for the French left flank and the vicinity of Paris. In contrast, the French, led by Gen. Joseph Joffre, though they had brief initial offensive success in Lorraine on the common border with Germany, were soon repulsed by the extensive German border fortifications.

Additionally, upon discovering the German sweeping maneuver on his left flank in mid-August, Joffre assumed the enemy center had to be weak, and he attacked there in the Ardennes forest with two field armies on 22 and 23 August, intending to outflank the German forces in central Belgium. However, it was a bad assumption. The Germans were not weak there; they had deployed more troops to the western front than Joffre estimated. As a result, the French forces were badly defeated and forced to retreat.

At the same time, in central Belgium one French field army and more than four divisions of the recently arrived British Expeditionary Force (BEF) moved forward to strike at the advancing German main effort. However, simultaneously with the battles in the Ardennes, the Germans struck first at Mons and Charleroi along the Sambre River, forcing the Allied forces to retreat—a withdrawal that ultimately continued south of the Marne River over the next twenty days. The Germans also defeated both a British rear guard at Le Cateau on 26 August and a French counterattack at Guise on 29 and 30 August, and so the Germans continued to advance.

Despite the successes, there were fissures in German operational-level planning and execution that quickly became debilitating cracks. In the spirit of independence fostered among units in the prewar Imperial German Army, the German field army commanders seemingly thought of themselves and their units as, essentially, fighting their own individual battles. As a result, they conducted operations without effective synchronization with the other army commanders to establish coherence of action relative to the larger strategic plan. This tendency was particularly pronounced with the two commanders on the German right wing (fighting the Allied left): Col. Gen. Alexander von Kluck (First Army) and Col. Gen. Karl von Bülow (Second Army). As a result, overall German commander Col. Gen. Helmut Count von Moltke (the Younger), with a weak communications system and a personal unwillingness to leave his headquarters that was located far

from the front, soon lost control of the right wing forces, effectively ceding to his subordinates authority to direct operations independently.

Consequently, a perilous lack of synchronization and coherence between the armies soon emerged due largely to a significant difference in the personalities of the commanders involved. Kluck, on the extreme right, was very aggressive and read directives from Moltke in that light. However, Bülow, to Kluck's left, was much more cautious—particularly after having to repulse an unexpectedly costly French counterattack at Guise. Therefore, in the absence of clear and timely revised instructions from Moltke, the German field commanders—particularly Kluck—began to adjust the pace of their operations according to their own individual temperaments, resulting in overall loss of unified action between their armies.

In addition, German miscalculation and command impetuosity were fueled, in part, by overly optimistic estimates of the damage caused by the success of the early German attacks. The reality was that despite the rapid progress of the initial German advance and the heavy casualties they inflicted on the Allied forces, the Germans were not really destroying the Allies as much as they were pushing them away. This left Allied forces largely intact; though in disarray, they were fully capable of reorganizing for counterattack if given the time.

Kluck saw this and tried to take advantage of it by independently changing his route of advance in order to envelop the French forces facing Bülow (see figure 2). His intent was to smash the French before they had a chance to reorganize. However, this maneuver turned his own right flank opposite Paris and created a gap between his troops and those of Bülow—while failing to catch the French. The gap handed the French an unexpected opportunity to split the German forces, which Joffre seized.

On 8 September, when Moltke found out about the gap that had opened on his lines, he became very pessimistic about the situation. Kluck, however, remained very optimistic, even after he discovered several days earlier (5 September) that the French were massing forces on his right. Willing to take what he viewed as a calculated risk, over the next few days Kluck stripped forces from his front on the Marne in phases to reinforce his right flank across the Ourcq River. He did this in the belief that he could beat the French there and then turn

back to the Marne front, where the British had retreated out of contact, before the Anglo-French force could organize for an attack against his weakened front.

While a series of piecemeal attacks and counterattacks were conducted on the Ourcq front as both sides gradually reinforced, Kluck's movements increased the gap between his forces and Bülow's Second Army, which was covered only by weak cavalry forces.

The French Response to the German Offensive

Meanwhile, after recovering from the opening shock of finding German forces to his left, Joffre responded with effective improvisations. First, he transferred troops from the stalemated front on his right to the threatened left, beginning as soon as the threat there was identified (after Mons-Charleroi). The assembly of French forces on Kluck's flank showed

Joffre's flexibility, and Joffre's subsequent orders showed his penchant for seizing the initiative.

Believing firmly in the superiority of offensive operations even during the French retreat, Joffre had urged his subordinates to conduct frequent counterattacks—the primary one being at Guise. Though able to use the French civilian communications network, he also personally made frequent visits to his subordinates to make sure they both knew his intentions and followed his orders.

Although centralized control of military operations often has proven to be disastrous in many cases of modern warfare, in this case, the Germans proved too decentralized and disjointed in action, giving Joffre's system of centralized control the advantage. He exercised this control through numerous on-the-spot dismissals of commanders and frequent visits to subordinate headquarters. This ensured that Joffre's overall intent for the actions of the French units was

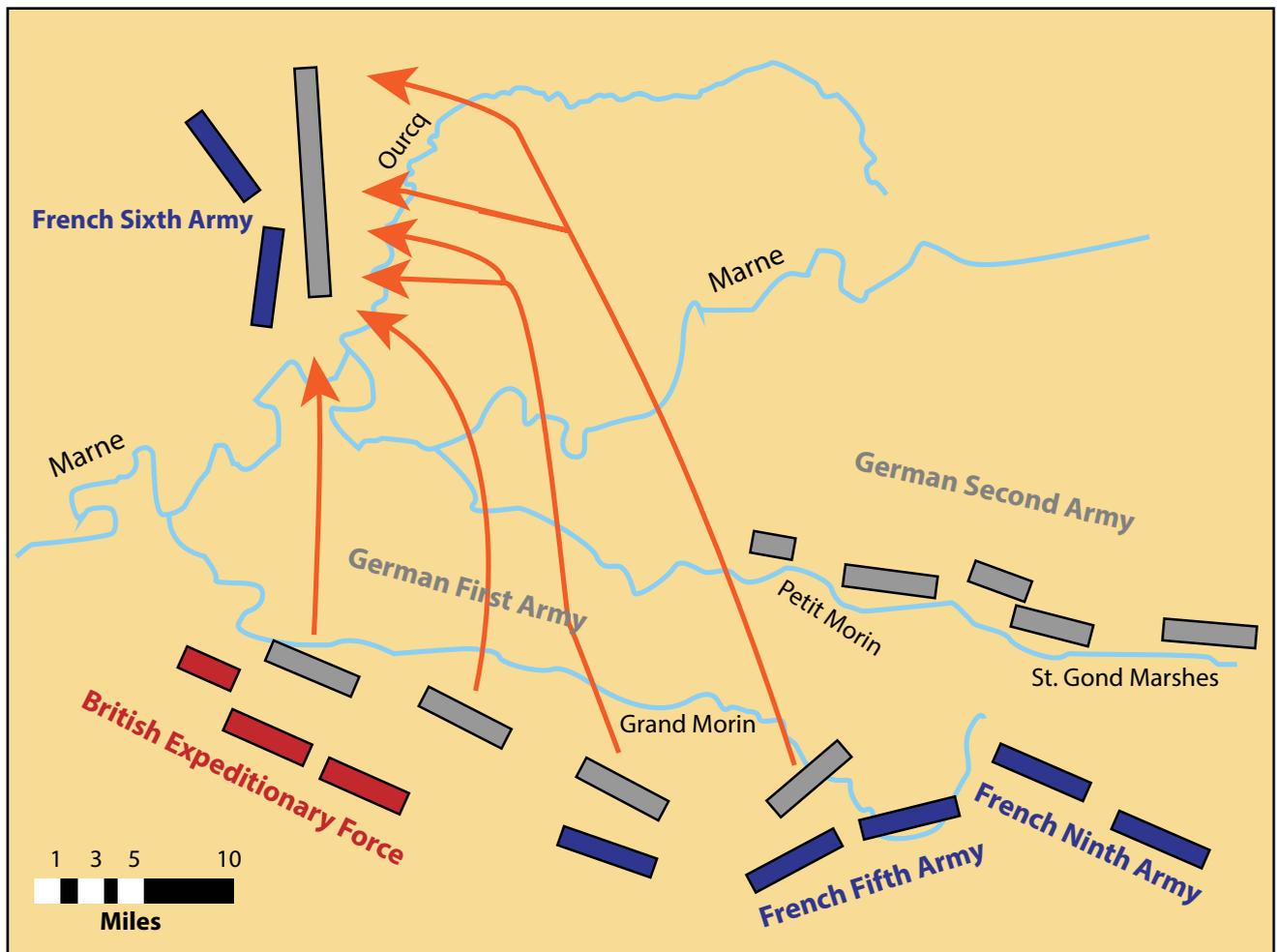


Figure 2. Kluck's Change of Front

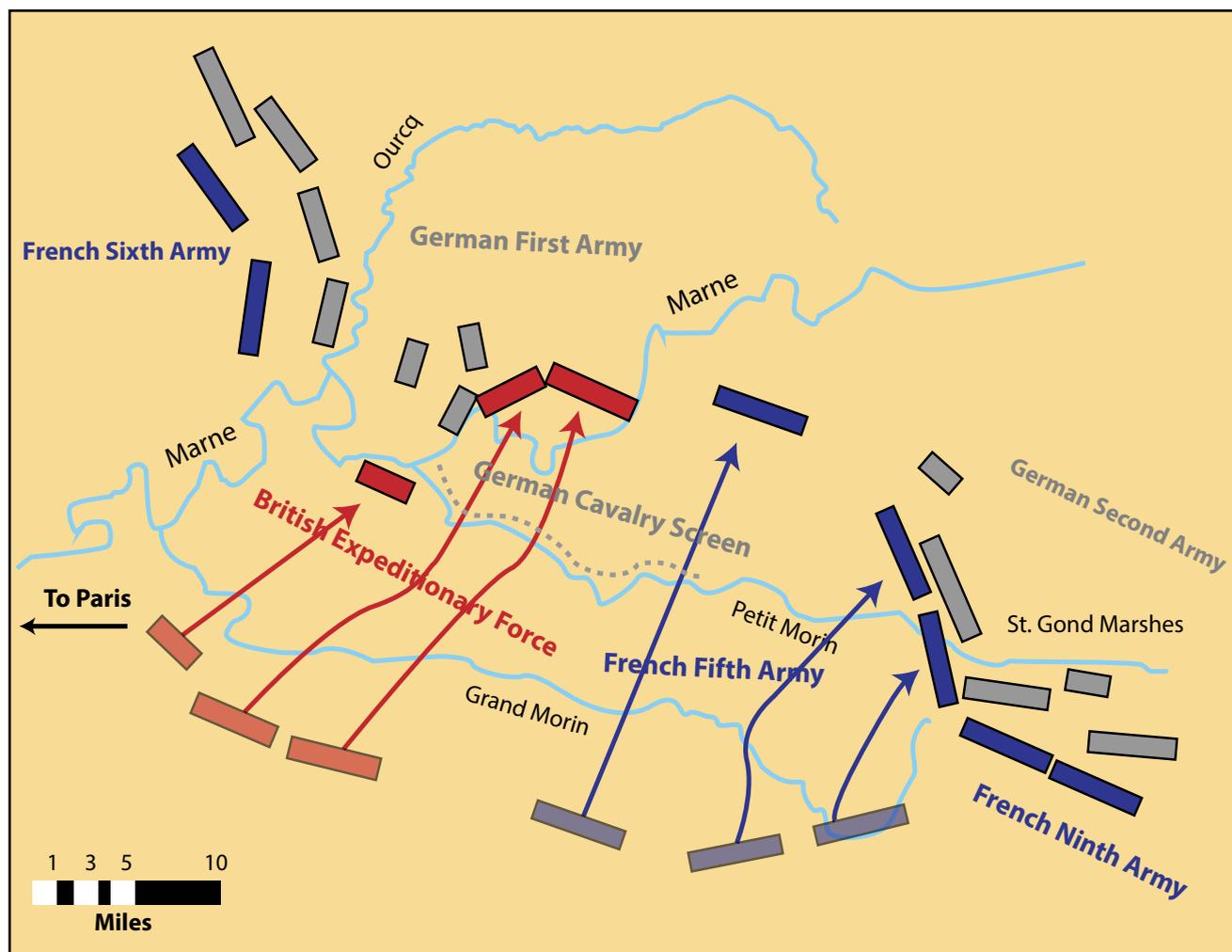


Figure 3. The Allied Advance into the Gap between the German First and Second Armies (as of 9 September 1914)

widely and clearly understood. He also managed to gain the cooperation of the British commander, the truculent Field Marshal Sir John French, who only followed Joffre's general concept because of Joffre's personal power of persuasion.

As German forces began to pull back to defensive positions, Joffre planned to counterattack as soon as he had assembled sufficient troops. The first reinforcements were organized as the new Sixth Army and were deployed in front of Paris. The French forces were a combination of reserve and active-duty forces. These were the troops who attacked Kluck's right flank and caused him to open a gap in German lines by turning his force to face them.

Meanwhile, on the Marne front, Joffre created a new army, the Ninth, out of reinforcements that

he placed to the right of the French Fifth Army (the command that had lost the battles of Charleroi and Guise). Joffre instructed these troops, with the British on their left, to attack into the gap between the German First and Second armies across the Marne (see figure 3). Joffre's concept was for the Sixth Army on the left to attack into the flank of the Germans, which would be frontally assaulted by the BEF and French Fifth Army simultaneously. Joffre hoped to make a swift advance into the German gap, allowing him to isolate and defeat the separate German forces.

However, Kluck reinforced his units before the French attacked. They wore down and defeated the Sixth Army flanking force, while the German cavalry screening forces—particularly the elite light infantry *Jäger*

units attached to the cavalry—slowed the Allied advance enough that the Germans were able to respond.

Having become aware of the gap that had opened in his lines, on 8 September Moltke sent his intelligence officer, General Staff Lt. Col. Richard Hentsch, as an emissary to assess and advise his subordinate army commanders. Cautious and conservative by nature, and with an imperfect picture of the overall situation, Hentsch reacted by persuading the equally cautious Bülow to begin a retreat the next day, an action which would then force Kluck to do so as well.

With conflicting and late orders among German forces as well as battlefield setbacks for both sides, 9 September dawned; it was destined to be an odd

day. The British had reached and were crossing the Marne alongside the French Sixth Army, fighting German cavalry rear guards as well as the right flank of Bülow's Second Army. The Germans were also trying to keep the initiative by attacking. Kluck was attempting to outflank the French Sixth Army, while Bülow, although pulling back his right flank, was still attacking and almost destroying the new French Ninth Army on his left flank. This chaotic dichotomy ended during the afternoon of 9 September when the Germans began a general retreat.

Subsequently, over the next three days the Germans withdrew thirty miles to the northeast to the line of the Aisne River, where ridges north of the river provided ideal defensive terrain. The Germans

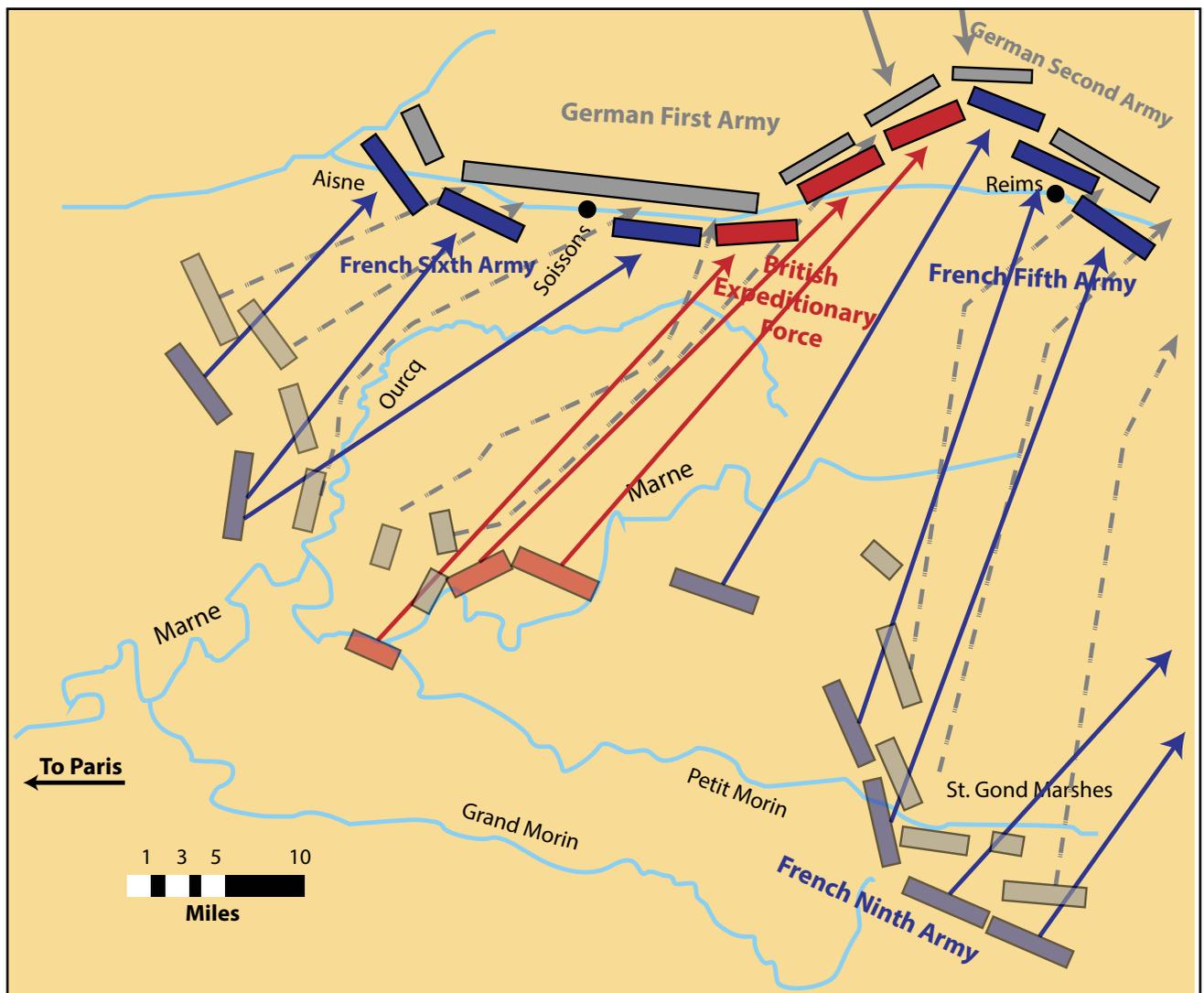


Figure 4. Final Disposition of Forces

were able to retreat in an orderly fashion and set up new positions on high ground overlooking the Aisne River and the city of Reims. When French and British troops caught up to what they expected to be dispirited and broken German soldiers in disarray, they ran into a buzz saw of prepared defensive positions that halted their advance (see figure 4). The defensive positions each side subsequently established facing each other were the harbinger of the coming years.

The practical outcome of this series of engagements was a geographic front between the German and Allied forces that stayed essentially unchanged for the remaining four years of the war, as the conflict evolved into static trench warfare. With a few exceptions, the German and Allied forces maintained the defensive positions they had established at the end of that six-week period until the end of the war in 1918.

Analysis of the Campaign's Mission Command Aspects

Since it is in vogue today to assert that mission command, with its emphasis on individual initiative by commanders at all levels, is, and historically has been, a panacea for succeeding in the chaos of the battlefield, one might conclude that prewar German indoctrination in mission-command-type operations should have guaranteed success. However, since success was not forthcoming, following this line of reasoning leads to the conclusion that German execution of mission command must have been badly flawed. This intriguing hypothesis invites detailed analysis using the six modern principles of mission command espoused by the U.S. Army today:¹

1. Build cohesive teams based on mutual trust.
2. Create shared understanding.
3. Provide a clear commander's intent.
4. Exercise disciplined initiative.
5. Use mission orders.
6. Accept prudent risk.

Build Cohesive Teams Based on Mutual Trust

At the start of the war, by any objective standard, the Germans were well trained and led—despite having not been in a major war for more than forty years. This was clearly evident in the resilience and discipline of the troops who were able to march great distances for

long periods and, upon arriving at their destinations, fight and win consecutive engagements. In conjunction, there existed a high degree of mutual trust and shared understanding of the operational environment among German officers, made conspicuous by the use of mission-type orders as a matter of course. Thus, at both the tactical and operational levels, the Germans surely had built cohesive teams, sharing a high degree of mutual trust between various echelons of command that, together, had confidence in the doctrine developed by their General Staff in the prewar period. Such German operational and tactical doctrine, based on its appreciation of the effect of modern weaponry on warfare—primarily heavy artillery, quick-firing field artillery, and machine guns—proved to be generally appropriate until trench warfare turned the western front into a massive siege.

A high level of mutual trust and cohesion was also evident in the decentralized structure of the prewar German army, where corps commanders usually were free to train their troops as they saw fit. In such training, two schools of tactical thought were present. The first was the newer mission-command style of conducting operations, promoted by Moltke the Elder, that officially extended mission command to the tactical level, directing infantry to attack using advances by bounds and emphasizing “fire and movement.” The second was the “old Prussian” school—similar to the French concept of *élan*—that believed German infantry held an inherent moral superiority that could overcome the effects of modern weaponry by courage and audacity. This latter concept tended to emphasize the use of close formations, where the troops advanced shoulder-to-shoulder, in the belief doing so would enhance control. Therefore, at the tactical level in the campaign, German units sometimes used more open (spread-out) formations and fire-and-movement tactics, and at other times they used more closed formations, although most traditionalists soon turned to the decentralized approach after the older tactics proved to be very costly in terms of casualties when facing modern weapons such as machine guns. Ultimately, the German forces would universally adopt mission-command style at the tactical level, with the espousal of infiltration tactics and the creation of specially trained *Sturmtruppen* (Stormtrooper) units later in World War I. However, in either case, the Germans emphasized close coordination between infantry and field artillery.



(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Imperial German Army Col. Gen. Alexander von Kluck, 30 March 1915

A combination of excellent organization, training, and staff work was essential in the creation of cohesive units. Those units performed well at the tactical and operational levels in the Marne campaign, as typified by the maneuvers Kluck had his corps and divisions conduct when he changed the facing of his army from south to east and shifted it twenty miles to the northwest while in contact with the enemy. However, the most important factor in this equation was leadership. The mutual trust of leaders at all echelons ensured that Kluck was not asking the impossible—but merely the almost impossible.

Create Shared Understanding

At the operational level, commanders shared an understanding of the expected operational environment and the capabilities of their troops. Col. Gen. Alexander von Kluck, the commander of the First Army, in particular, showed a great understanding of the capabilities of his soldiers, marching them relentlessly during the campaign in the advance, in shifting

to new fronts, and ultimately, in orderly withdrawal. Despite the extreme physical exertion, Kluck's troops never failed to meet his expectations.

However, since this was the first German campaign using such large armies, by the end of the advance, 8-9 September, the mutual understanding required for properly executing mission-command-style control broke down between Moltke's headquarters and the commanders in the field. Differing understandings of the operational situation and the capabilities of the troops showed a rift, which resulted in the ordering of a controversial German retreat that many would later bitterly complain was unnecessary.²

Provide a Clear Commander's Intent

Closely related to this rift in perception of the situation, German commanders failed in the modern mission-command model primarily by failing to effectively provide a clear commander's intent. This failure was due to a combination of the German Army's command climate, the lack of adequate communications technology for an advancing mass army, and the relatively weak and vacillating personality of the senior German commander, Chief of the General Staff Moltke.

Command climate. Moltke was the de facto field commander of the German forces—with the Kaiser as the nominal commander. Moltke's uncle, Field Marshal Helmut von Moltke (the Elder), had led Prussia to victory in the Wars of German Unification (1864-71) and had practically invented the concept of mission command, which he pioneered along with the unique German dual-command system. Under this system, a specially trained General Staff officer (chief of staff) was paired with each senior commander above the brigade level. This officer shared responsibility for command decisions with the commander. Commanders rarely went against the opinion of their General Staff partner. This created a command climate that allowed for the extensive use of mission orders because General Staff officers could be expected to know what needed to be done in familiar situations based on training, experience, and constant participation in contingency planning, which reduced the need for detailed instructions.

The effect of strategy on operations. In the pre-war period, the German General Staff headquarters in Berlin had, mainly, devoted itself to the study of

solutions and contingencies for a specific military problem that politicians had given them—the high probability of a two-front war. Aggressive German foreign policy in the late nineteenth century had alienated several other powers, which had resulted in the creation of military alliances designed to counter potential German military adventurism. But in an ironic twist, by 1914 the German military, led by the younger Moltke, was so wedded to its high-risk plan to win a two-front war that even state political decisions dealing with nonmilitary issues were made based on the primacy of military considerations in anticipation of such a war. In this way, when simmering nationalist passions erupted on the continent, the two-front war became a reality—not because it was necessarily needed, but largely because it had been planned for.

German senior leadership. Kaiser Wilhelm II had selected Moltke to lead the Imperial German Army primarily for his congeniality rather than for his military prowess. In 1914, the Kaiser, although technically the commander in chief of the armed forces, elected to let his highly trained military professionals do their jobs with minimum interference, offering only occasional common sense comments—that were generally ignored.

For his part, Moltke also trusted decentralization of execution authority. As a result, his faith in the mission-command-type approach led him to plan by giving only minimal direction to the activities of his subordinate field army commanders, but he did not anticipate how minimal his control would become as the campaign progressed.³ A weak technological communications system, together with an unwieldy organization, were vulnerabilities that helped create a command and control environment that largely went out of his control.

Communications technology. Organizationally, eight field armies reported directly to Moltke and his headquarters, *the Oberste Heeresleitung*, without any intervening army group headquarters. The great challenge of managing such a large span of control was exacerbated by poor communications technology as well as Moltke's decision not to move his headquarters forward, closer to his subordinates, which would facilitate giving his personal guidance at critical times when the technical communication capabilities broke down.

Communications technology in 1914 included the telephone, telegraph, and radio. In a pinch, aerial or

ground couriers could also be used. Typically, many national armies in 1914 used the telephone for local communications and the telegraph for longer distances. However, the German army had abandoned the telegraph in 1910, planning instead to depend on a combination of the telephone and the radio. As a result, at the outset of war in 1914, the telephone was supposed to be the primary means of communication, with signal troops laying semipermanent lines to each field army headquarters; temporary lines and personal contact supported units below that level.

However, peacetime maneuvers and planning had failed to provide an adequate appreciation for the extreme difficulties swiftly moving units in combat—advancing under fire from modern weapons across foreign territory—would encounter using the telephone in circumstances where existing civilian systems would not be available. Experience soon showed that the field-wire troops could not lay lines as quickly as the army advanced, and within six days, the radio had become the primary mode. However, the radio also proved to have significant shortcomings in actual use. The greatly expanded volume of radio transmissions that resulted from its having become the primary means of communication between echelons, combined with the need to encode and decode each transmission, resulted in a time delay of up to twenty-six hours for messages. Such delays meant that situation updates and directives passed each other in transmission, and both were obsolete by the time they reached the recipient.⁴ Additionally, contemporary radios were bulky, sensitive, and prone to breakdowns, and they were only issued in limited quantities down to the army level.⁵ As a backup to the electronic system, couriers were available, but using them was time consuming. In addition, a limited number of airplanes were available for carrying messages between headquarters, but the potential for using them in such a role was ignored.⁶

The technological vulnerabilities and limitations, frequent equipment failures, and failure to use alternate means to communicate vital instructions all combined to greatly disrupt the German field-command routine, which was based on nightly meetings where subordinates produced situation reports and commanders planned for the next day's operations. The systemic breakdown particularly affected Moltke.



(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Imperial German Army Gen. Karl von Bülow, 1915

Delayed reports meant Moltke issued directives that were already obsolete, compelling his subordinates to use their discretion and initiative in an attempt to divine the current operational situation and concept.

Nevertheless, despite such obviously serious flaws in the system, Moltke steadfastly remained at his headquarters well distant from the battlefield. Presumably, this was to keep the Kaiser, who would have insisted on accompanying him to the field, out of harm's way, but also it was because this was Moltke's command style.

Exercise Disciplined Initiative and Use Mission Orders

As a consequence of technological and organizational impediments, and a senior leader with a highly detached command style, the fog of war was omnipresent in the German chain of command. Since Moltke could exercise control only in a very detached way, the commanders of the field armies on the German right wing were left

to their own devices to interpret Moltke's intent from vague or outdated communiques.

While such a situation allowed for the field army commanders to exercise initiative, that initiative was only disciplined within the scope of each separate army's operations, and it lacked an overall current operational concept among the armies. As a result, the German forces as a whole were not synchronizing their activities with each other to achieve operational effectiveness. For example, while Kluck continued to advance every day, Bülow rested his troops, placing them a day's march behind. Kluck's reorienting of most of his army on the Ourcq River front while leaving a large gap screened only by cavalry lacked the prudence that disciplined synchronization with other armies (especially Bülow's) would have mitigated. But in this situation, Kluck felt the risk was justified.

Also, bad communications had adverse effects both ways. Frustrated by a lack of timely information coming to him, Moltke developed an overly pessimistic view of his operations in early September. From his perspective, the Allied forces were not being destroyed at an adequate level, as the few prisoners being sent to the rear seemed to indicate, and the defeated enemy forces as a whole still seemed to be retaining unit cohesion. What Moltke did not understand was that mass armies had changed operational conditions. It was now very difficult for an attacking marching army to destroy a defeated marching army except by encirclement because the lethality and effective stand-off range of weaponry, as well as unit mobility, had become too great.

Strategically, Moltke's main objective was to completely envelop the Allied forces and push them back upon the German forces on Moltke's left flank. While such a maneuver was probably beyond the capabilities of the German army, based on the number of troops available, Moltke lost sight of this and feared an enemy trap. The net result was that the German commander became very pessimistic and soon believed his right wing was in far greater danger than it actually was.

In any case, by the end of the campaign the commander's intent coming from Moltke was only reaching his commanders sporadically, based on days-old situation updates. Since events had generally overcome such directives by the time they were received, the field commanders, who were trained in a system that

emphasized initiative, responded by going their own ways.

The lack of information and apparent unresponsiveness from his field commanders in turn caused Moltke to issue new directives that did not necessarily reflect battlefield realities but instead resulted in responses to news of Joffre's counteroffensive with actions that, counterproductively, enhanced chances for Allied success.

Responding to this situation, as he refused to go to the front himself, Moltke instead sent his equally conservative and pessimistic intelligence officer, Hentsch, who, based on little accurate information, saw the situation as desperate. He subsequently manipulated Bülow into retreating even while he was still attacking—an action which then forced Kluck to do so as well.

However, the situation facing the Germans on 8 September was nowhere near as dire as Hentsch, Moltke, and then Bülow believed. Kluck had defeated the French Sixth Army on the Ourcq and had, at a minimum, destroyed its offensive capabilities. The cavalry screening force in the gap between Kluck and Bülow had greatly slowed the British advance. While Bülow's right wing was gradually giving way to the advance of the French Fifth Army, his left wing had crumbled the French Ninth Army. Rather than a retreat, a simple reshuffling of the German forces could have allowed the German advance to continue while Moltke brought up forces from his left. Instead, the Germans, upon the advice of Hentsch, backed by the endorsement of Moltke, elected to surrender the initiative and retreat. One result was that the Germans never really regained the initiative until 1918.

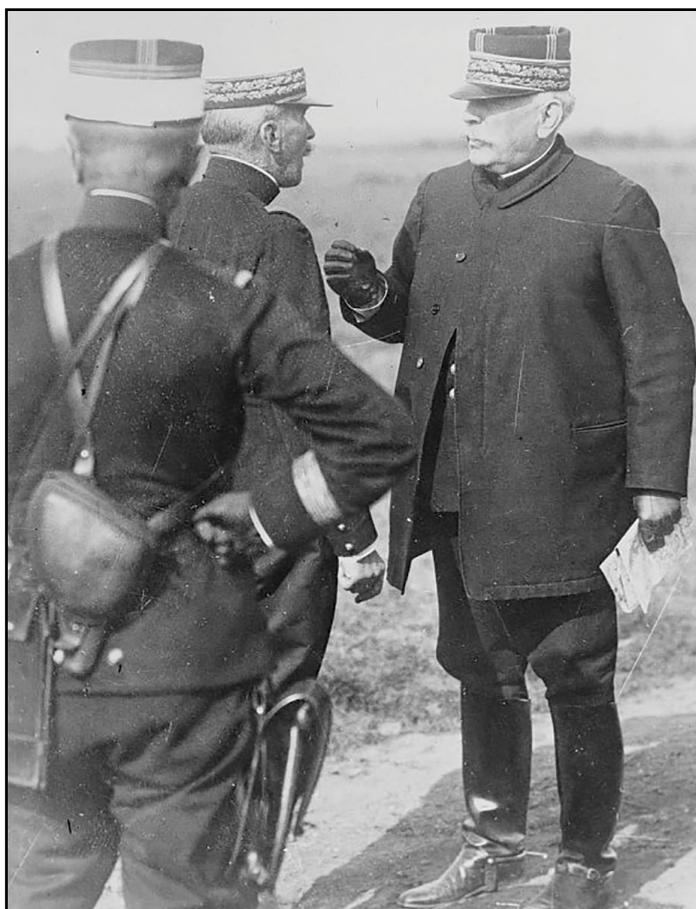
Accept Prudent Risk

Emerging aggressiveness on the part of senior leaders, manifest in willingness to accept prudent risk, appears to have been the key discriminating factor leading to the outcome. While both the Germans and French espoused assertiveness in field commands, the actual fog of war tempered this. During the first Marne campaign, an incomplete knowledge of the enemy's deployment on both sides led to a fear of encirclement. This fear curbed aggressiveness and created excessive caution among the Germans and long retreats in the case of the Allies. Even Kluck was at times fearful

of uncovering his right flank, which partially explains why he transferred so many troops to the Ourcq front. On the other side, French Fifth Army commander Gen. Charles Lanrezac, an intellectual and well-regarded peacetime officer, lost all aggressiveness once faced with the uncertainties of war. Lanrezac proved to be a poor subordinate that Joffre had to replace.

At a higher level, Joffre himself proved very aggressive in contrast to Moltke. Although his actions could have resulted in catastrophe, despite previous failures aggressiveness drove Joffre to attack on 6 September along the Marne and Ourcq fronts when the enemy was still successfully advancing or had previously repulsed earlier counterattacks. The large and risky French counteroffensive was successful enough to force the Germans to withdraw forty miles because its very aggressiveness frightened the German high command.

The Germans probably could have reshuffled their forces and repulsed the counteroffensive, but at that point they were basically fighting separate, disjointed



(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

French Army commander Gen. Joseph Joffre issuing orders in the field.

battles at the field-army level rather than as a whole, so a coordinated response to the Allied advance, aside from a retreat to regroup, probably was not possible.

Other Impacts

The attitudes, personalities, and leadership styles on both sides of the conflict had a significant impact on the outcome of the campaign.

Contrasting attitudes. Moltke became very pessimistic at the first sign that there would be no swift victory despite having a very large, well-organized, and well-supplied force at his disposal that had won an impressive successive string of tactical victories. In contrast, his French counterpart, Joffre, remained optimistic despite a month of continuous defeats and retreat. In doing so, both Joffre and his troops showed great psychological resilience in the campaign in contrast to the German High Command.

For example, despite general weariness, the German troops continued to perform well. This was clearly evident in their ability to blunt the effects of a great French counterattack that could have been catastrophic for the Germans, who responded instead with a relatively short and well-ordered retreat. Nevertheless, Joffre publicly transformed the fact that the Allies had forced the Germans onto the defensive and into a retreat into a major victory—in the minds of his soldiers, the civilian population, and likely, the German High Command as well.

As a result, given the strategic situation, the lack of a quick victory was for Germany a major, if not immediately apparent, psychological and moral defeat. Ironically, while the Germans operated using what is today almost universally considered to be the superior mode of command (mission command) to tactically win all the battles of the campaign in terms of number of casualties inflicted and other damage to the Allies, they strategically lost because their leaders had decided they had. The purported Napoleonic adage which holds that “the moral is to the physical as three to one” evidently applied to the situation of the Germans and French on 9 September 1914, as it still applies to military forces today.

Impact of personality. Surely the personalities of the individual commanders played the greatest role leading to the outcome of the campaign. The most glaring examples are manifest in the relationships of Moltke, Kluck, and Bülow.

The personality differences are evident in the comparative reactions of the two field army commanders, Kluck and Bülow, to the abject fatigue resulting from a month of marching, intermittent battles, and the uncertainty of the enemy situation. While at the start of September both commanders recognized the exhaustion of their forces, Kluck continued to advance, crossing the Marne and then transferring the bulk of his army by forced marches to the Ourcq front. After fighting there for five days, Kluck marched his troops forty miles to the new Aisne positions, where they then repulsed Allied attacks. Kluck was able to lead his forces in such extraordinary effort even after they had reached extreme exhaustion.

Meanwhile, Bülow rested his troops for a day and a half and slowed his advance to invest the minor fortress of La Fere, which the French then evacuated. Bülow's caution resulted in Kluck's inadvertent gain of a day's march on him, which contributed to the gap that opened between the two armies. Only Bülow's left wing continued to attack until the retreat to the Aisne began.

Kluck was able to get so much more out of his troops than Bülow because his optimistic aggressiveness kept up their morale. He also seemed to have a clear understanding of what his troops were capable of, and he had confidence that he and his subordinates could get them to do it. However, Kluck's aggressiveness irritated both Moltke and Bülow, causing Moltke to twice place Kluck under Bülow's command.

The enduring importance of leadership. The most obvious lesson of first Marne campaign with relevance not only to mission command but also to the concept of command in general is the enduring importance of leadership at all levels. At the start of the war, Europe had enjoyed a period of more than forty years of general peace, although it saw a concurrent rise of large conscripted armies. Formerly intermixed national identities congealed into national states with deep mistrust of each other. Massive armies emerged as had never been fielded before. As a result, on the European continent, no senior officers in any of the alliances that would eventually fight each other had any practical experience commanding such large forces except in exercises, though a great deal of theory had been written about such commands. In Great Britain, British commanders did not even have the experience of exercise maneuvers, as the British

army only organized its larger commands upon mobilization in response to an emerging crisis because of the great expenses involved.

Conclusions

On paper, the prewar German conception of mission command championed similar concepts as the principles discussed above. However, a combination of leader inexperience in leading large bodies of troops (which often led to caution when audacity was required), overly pessimistic and easily discouraged personalities at the highest level of German command, and the unreliable communications technology of the day led to a poor use of several mission-command principles and the eventual withdrawal of German forces to static lines.

At the start of the war, the Imperial German Army was the major proponent of the concept of what we today would recognize as mission command at the operational level.⁷ However, in the first Marne campaign, the use of mission command appears to be one of the major reasons for German failure because it was conducted so poorly. At the same time, the French were ultimately successful while employing a method of command that was not close to the mission-command model but, in comparison, was highly disciplined by an aggressive senior commander.

In general, successful armies in the modern era have espoused mission-command-type concepts unless they had a major advantage in numbers or technology over their adversaries. Thus, one reason for studying the first campaign of World War I is the relevant parallelism of some of its aspects to the current day. For example, in recent military writings, we see a lot of debate about theory and philosophy related to conducting war (i.e., What is mission command? What is the center of gravity?

What is counterinsurgency? Should counterinsurgency be population- or enemy-centric? What is the proper acronym or designation for counterinsurgency?).

Similarly, strident debates regarding military theories of strategy and tactics during the era before August 1914 were diverse and abstract, and war—before the actual war—had become very theoretical. Many prewar theories were tested during the first six weeks after war broke out, resulting in reality—which had sometimes been ignored during prewar debate—creeping in. As in all wars, reality forced change.

In the modern, technological age, such theoretical debates may also be leading to specious conclusions.

For example, the fog of war is often now minimized in importance, theoretically mitigated by the concept of “situational awareness” based on the assumption that technology-assisted intelligence collection can almost completely dissipate the fog. However, such dissipation is likely an illusion, and the fog will last as long as wars are fought between human beings who make decisions in unpredictable ways.

In 1914, there also were erroneous expectations as to how weapons would perform and how the enemy would react to them, just as there were

when the U.S. military embarked upon operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Our experiences in those places illustrate that bad and misleading assumptions continue to be a persistent feature of warfare.

Additionally, the paradoxes of the 1914 Marne campaign, when compared to those of more recent conflicts, appear to validate a recurring pattern of needs. Combatants need a general concept of the conduct of operations to guide actions—at least a minimally accurate assessment of enemy capabilities—and planning that



(Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

Imperial German Army Chief of the General Staff
Helmuth von Moltke

adheres to time-honored principles of war that need to be followed, especially when situational awareness is incomplete or the enemy responds in an unexpected manner.

Epilogue

At the highest levels—despite his faith in them—the Kaiser’s professionals failed him in this campaign, ultimately resulting in the loss of the war together with the loss of his crown. With the loss of the war, the severe peace terms imposed on Germany played a key role in causing World War II. Thus, the mostly forgotten German defeat of a century ago not only played a major role in the shaping of the modern world but also holds lessons of importance for military professionals today.

Though the First Battle of the Marne was more than one hundred years ago, a reflection of the battle was recently invoked indirectly in the news when French police conducted a massive manhunt for two murderous terrorists across the villages and rivers that marked the 1914 battlefield. The town of Dammartin, where the manhunt ended, was, in fact, directly behind the Ourcq battlefield that was almost captured by the Germans in 1914—right before they retreated. Where it is remembered at all in the public consciousness today, the battle is mostly recollected for a legendary convoy of Paris civilian taxicabs that took troops to the front to

reputedly swing the battle to Allied victory—and the appearance of a gap in the German lines subsequently filled by Allied troops. In fact, the taxicabs played only a minor role in the campaign, as the troops they transported did not even fight until the next day, and the German gap was opposite an equally big gap in Allied lines, which the Germans were unable to exploit.

Nevertheless, such mythical lore—however accurate as a matter of historical fact—metaphorically highlights the decisive role that psychology played in the actual Marne campaign. This now-ancient campaign raises many questions for analysis, which may yield timeless lessons that transcend mere antiquarian interest. If the Germans were so successful, why did they ultimately fail? And, how did the French, initially operationally inept, manage to turn events around?

It is useful to note that the Germans won every battle at the tactical level—but strategically and operationally they lost the campaign. This appears to be mainly from the uncertainties of warfare that crept into the psychology of the German leadership, resulting in hesitancy and missed opportunities. Ultimately, the threat of the gap between the German units, because of communications failures, was mostly in the minds of the German commanders. Ironically, this mental gap was more decisive to the campaign than was the literal gap between the units. ■

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Notes

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