



A young German soldier engaged in the Battle of the Somme, 1916. This photograph was provided by the German Federal Archives to Wikicommons and is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 3.0 Germany License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

The Downfall of Germany in WWI

The Failure of Schlieffen's Design

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It should've been easy. Schlieffen's plan was so brilliant and well-crafted it would surely deliver the speedy victory over France and Russia it promised. But like most things during war, it was never that simple. It was actually not the plan itself that failed Germany in World War I, but the lack of operational art behind it. This article analyzes Germany's Schlieffen Plan and looks at the framework of ends, ways, means, and risks and how it applies to both modern strategic planning and also Germany's failure to do so in WWI.

Alfred Von Schlieffen

Alfred von Schlieffen was the former chief of the German general staff. He devised a strategy in 1905 that would enable Germany to fight a two-front war with France and Russia, Germany's most likely adversaries. The plan was based on the Battle of Cannae, in which

Hannibal defeated a much larger Roman force (Limbach, n.d.). The irony is while the plan receives blame and criticism for Germany's loss in WWI, Schlieffen had stepped down by that time and his plan was not carried out as originally intended because his successor made major modifications compromising its potential for success.

Operational Art and Design

Operational art allows leaders to view problems from different perspectives, using different lenses. For such development to occur and for it to be successful, joint force commanders (JFCs) must make effective use of operational art through operational design. Operational art is the framework used for mission planning. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020) defines it as a way "to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means, and evaluating



U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chaisson and 1st Lt. Kalabsa conduct analog map planning for Dragoon Ready 20 at Hoenfels Training Area, Germany Oct. 23, 2019. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. Robert Fellingham)

risks” (p. xii). Operational design uses concepts and elements to fill in the blanks of the broad framework of those ends, ways, and means.

Start with the End

Understanding the ends of an operation is an essential part of the operational framework. According to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020), joint planning groups (JPGs) identify the ends by understanding the military objectives necessary for success, their relation to the strategic plan, and how those objectives will enable strategic goals.

Modern Military End State

Before any actual planning can begin, the JPG must first understand what it is trying to achieve. Per the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018), the military end state should “provide a unifying purpose around which to focus actions and resources” (p. II-5). Once JPGs have a focal point, they can backwards plan and identify the objectives necessary to accomplish the designated end goal.

Germany’s End State

Germany’s end game was multi-tiered: the swift defeat of France and Russia to allow the German Empire to expand its seaports, advance its trade power, and gain sea and land superiority. Schmitt (1920) identified two major objectives in Schlieffen’s original design:

- German land forces had to push into France and capture Paris while destroying their military.
- Germany would then quickly transition to defeat Russian troops in the east.

Schlieffen’s plan centered on using speed, momentum, and surprise to their advantage in France. If they did not obtain an expeditious victory there, Russia would most likely gather forces and mount an attack from the other front, splitting German forces.

Develop the Ways

The first step to paving the road to the military end state is to understand the enemy’s Center of Gravity (COG) and all identified decisive points. Once those are established, JPGs can then focus on achieving their military end state. This part of the planning process is labeled as “developing the ways.” The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018) describe ways as the sequence of actions necessary to accomplish

proposed objectives and successfully meet the desired military end state. This includes developing a deep knowledge of the enemy’s disposition and composition as well as the operational environment.

Planning an Appropriate Approach

During the planning process, the JPG uses operational design elements to fill in the plan’s framework. One of the most important things to understand before fine-tuning a plan, and perhaps the most critical element, is the COG. Joint Publication (JP) 5-0: Joint Planning defines the COG as the following:

“The COG is the source of power or strength that enables a military force to achieve its objective and is what an opposing force can orient its actions against that will lead to enemy failure. COGs are determined by their impact on the military end state. Success requires protecting the friendly COG while defeating the enemy COG. (2020, p. IV-22)”

In short, the COG is that critical factor, or nucleus, around which everything else in the operational environment revolves. When planning, it is equally important to know and understand both the friendly and enemy COGs. The enemy COG gives the JPG a focus of attack, whether it is physically, ideologically, or diplomatically. The friendly COG guides the JPG on how to best protect its own interests throughout the operation.

The Schlieffen Plan

For both France and Russia, the original Schlieffen plan identified the respective enemy COGs as their central military forces and planned a direct approach for both. The idea was to push north through Belgium to infiltrate France behind the bulk of their defenses. Once successful, Germany would hold Paris while shifting its forces back to the east to meet Russia, avoiding a simultaneous two-front war. The potential problem for Germany was such movements are large and long and require a vast array of logistical support (Ludendorff, 1919). A lot could go wrong.

Resource the Means

Once JPGs understand the military end state, develop necessary objectives, and plan the concept of those operations, they must identify the logistical and sustainment requirements to carry out the plan effectively and efficiently. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020) describe means as the resources needed to achieve the planned sequence of actions. Such resourcing also requires anticipating potential complications and understanding the operational reach necessary for successful decisive action. The following categories must also be included for proper planning:

Logistics: Determining whether the plan is feasible, suitable, acceptable, or needs adjusting.

Forecasting: Anticipating shortfalls or areas where pre-planning/prestaging can overcome proposed problem sets.

Operational Reach: The distance/duration across which a force can properly employ and sustain their capabilities.

Executing the Plan

Germany's plan was all about speed, surprise, and a direct approach. In fact, Neiberg (2005) notes even one of Germany's most influential generals, Gen. Erich von Ludendorff, guaranteed victory through Belgium and penetration into France within 24 hours. Germany did a great job preparing for this operation by upgrading its rail systems and roadways and even used the nation's taxicab services to help transport additional troops. This created the opportunity to resource the country's plan effectively and allowed them to move far faster than their adversaries could react or anticipate.

Identify the Risks

Identifying risk is a crucial part of the planning process. Per the Joint Chiefs of Staff (2020), risk identifies those chances and potential points of failure with the planned sequence of

actions. By acknowledging those possible failures, the JPG and the JFC can plan to avoid and overcome those risks, develop mitigation methods, or accept the risk.

What Could Go Wrong?

Accepting risk is necessary when planning and conducting operations. Acceptable risks are those risks that might not be mitigated, but the JFC feels the potential rewards are worth the effort. Often these risks are accepted to achieve termination criteria. Termination is a set of necessary criteria or standards to accomplish before military actions can cease (Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018). Such criteria might be the eradication of enemy forces in a particular area or a peaceful treaty that ends an arms race. This would bring about the previously mentioned military end state.

As a hypothetical example, consider the final planned offensive of a particular operation. After going over the plan, the JFC identifies that forces are dwindling and logistics are running short at that point of the operation. The plan still expects superior ground forces but without adequate aerial and artillery support to provide true overmatch. The JFC may determine that while there may be increased losses, the ends justify the means. Therefore, the JFC accepts the risk that there is limited support available and still push with the perceived superior ground forces to achieve the termination criteria.

Someone Has to Lose

Sometimes, accepted risks are just too significant, and the operation cannot meet termination criteria. The German government adopted Schlieffen's plan as the sole concept for World War I. It never considered another option and that decision cost them dearly. According to Dillon (2020), not developing a "plan-B in the (likely) event the risky Schlieffen Plan would fail" (para. 6) was purely misplaced arrogance. The entire operation hinged



A German prisoner helps British wounded make their way to a dressing station near Bernafay Wood following fighting on Bazentin Ridge, July 19, 1916 during the Battle of the Somme. (Photograph by Ernest Brooks, provided by United Kingdom Government)

on speed, surprise, and France's swift defeat. Germany had no contingencies planned if progress slowed. Termination criteria was simply the destruction of French and Russian forces. Germany assumed significant risk in placing all its eggs in one basket, placing no relevant concern in Belgian resistance, England's British Expeditionary Force, or France's combat capabilities and will. The plan ultimately failed and Germany's gamble did not pay off. Belgium successfully slowed German forces with entrenched warfare and Germany wound up in a two-front campaign with Russia and France, which eventually cost them the war.

Conclusion

Schlieffen's plan, based on a previously successful historical military campaign, was near-perfect on paper but without a high level of operational art behind it, and implemented poorly, it was destined to fail. Studying the operational art of both successful and failed operations and strategies better prepares leaders to make sound decisions under stressful conditions. It is imperative Soldiers learn from others' victories and mistakes in order to prepare for the future fight.

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