

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 4 ★ Issue 2

World War I:

First Marne

DATE:

September 5–12, 1914

LOCATION:

Marne River Valley, NE France

OPPOSING FORCES

Germans: Approximately 900,000 soldiers in three German armies. Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the General Staff, was in overall command. His commanders participating in the battle were Gens. Alexander von Kluck (1st Army), Karl von Bülow (2nd Army), and Max von Hausen (3rd Army).

Allies (French and English): Approximately 1,200,000 soldiers under Gen. Joseph Joffre, Chief of the General Staff and Supreme Commander of French forces. His commanders participating in the battle were Gens. Charles Lanrezac (Fifth Army, later replaced by Gen. Franchet d'Espérey), Michel-Joseph Maunoury (Sixth Army), and Ferdinand Foch (Ninth Army). Field Marshal Sir John French commanded the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). Gen. Joseph Galliéni, the Military Governor of Paris, also played a pivotal role.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In the summer of 1914, an assassin in Sarajevo ignited the flames of war among the Great Powers of Europe. Hoping for a quick victory, Germany launched its Schlieffen Plan, a massive offensive sweep through Belgium that turned south toward Paris. Under the onslaught, French divisions and their newly arrived British allies were soon in full retreat. It seemed that France would soon surrender, allowing Germany to turn its attention east toward Russia. But everything changed at the Marne River in early September when the Allies exploited German mistakes to halt the advance. And because this “Miracle of the Marne” deprived Germany of a swift victory, it changed the war from what was expected to be quick and decisive into a grinding contest of trench warfare and unthinkable attrition.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by the Germans – After their success in the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871), the German states united to form the German Empire. This significantly changed the balance of power in Europe. By 1908, two competing alliances had formed: The first was the Triple Alliance (often referred to as the Central Powers) of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy. The second was the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Great Britain. It was in this powder

The spark occurred on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where much of the Slavic population harbored resentment over being annexed by Austria-Hungary. During a state visit by Archduke Franz Ferdinand (heir to the Habsburg throne) and his wife Sophie, members of a secretive Serbian-nationalist group assassinated the couple. Convinced of Serbia's involvement, an incensed Austria-Hungary prepared for war. By 24 July, Serbia, expecting to be attacked, mobilized its army. The next day, Austria-Hungary mobilized its army while Russia put its army on alert.

Russia's alert, followed closely by a partial mobilization, alarmed the Germans, whose entire national planning rested on the assumption that they would have to fight a two-front war against France and Russia. On 31 July, Germany sent Russia an urgent demand to stand down their army, along with a demand to France that they not mobilize theirs. On 1 Aug., after Russia ignored the demand and France made it clear that they would not bow to German pressure, Kaiser Wilhelm II signed the order for German mobilization. It had taken only a month – World War I had begun!

With the Kaiser's order, Germany's war plan took over. Unfortunately, Germany had only one plan, and it called for total war. Count Alfred von Schlieffen, during his time as Germany's Chief of the General Staff (1891–1906), expected to fight a two-front war against France and Russia. He spent years developing a bold offensive plan that would sweep through Belgium and northern France with a powerful right flank, while the left flank would allow the French to penetrate Germany – preventing them from reinforcing their own left flank – until the German right “hammer” could crush them against this “anvil.” The plan predicted France's surrender in six weeks, whereupon the Germans could move forces east by railroad to confront what was expected to be the slower mobilizing Russians. The Schlieffen Plan was approved in 1905. (*Map 1*)

By 1914, the new Chief of the General Staff, Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, the Younger, had modified the plan, strengthening the left flank at the expense of the right and narrowing the arc of advance of the right wing to prevent violating Dutch neutrality. Nevertheless, by 2 Aug., the Schlieffen Plan was in motion and German divisions were moving into Luxembourg. Germany issued an ultimatum to Belgium to let its armies pass. But when Belgium refused on Die 11th, German