



The Schlieffen Plan: International Perspectives on the German Strategy for World War I ed. Hans Ehlert, Michael Epkenhans, and Gerhard P. Gross.

Trans. David T. Zabecki. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 2014. Pp. vii, 577. ISBN 978-0-8131-4746-8.

Review by Jack Binkley, The University of Maryland (jbinkley@fdic.gov).

No military plan has greater iconic status than the Schlieffen Plan of First World War fame. It was devised by the Chief of the German General Staff, Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen (1833–1913) to resolve Germany's strategic problem of having to fight a two-front war against France and Russia. The idea in its simplest form was to deploy most of the German forces to defeat France to the west before Russia could mobilize in the east. Schlieffen envisioned a massive sweep on the right flank through Belgium and around the rear of French armies on the Franco-German border in a battle of total annihilation. Much of the literature on the First World War has been preoccupied with explaining the failure of the Schlieffen Plan in the early weeks of the war. Did Schlieffen's successor at the outbreak of the war, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, fail to adhere to the plan or was it simply impractical to begin with?

Historian Terrance Zuber turned a page in the scholarship of World War I when he posited¹ that the Schlieffen Plan was a myth perpetuated by German general staff members to exonerate themselves of having failed in 1914. Since then scholars have aligned with or against Zuber's argument. Seeking to resolve this historical controversy, the Military History Research Office in Potsdam, Germany, sponsored an international conference to explore the Zuber thesis. The resulting papers are gathered in the book under review here.² Zuber himself has stated³ that he was invited to the conference but found it to be "an ambush," where the German press "had been invited to announce that the existence of the Schlieffen Plan had been proven." He never did present his paper and, unfortunately, no contributor to *The Schlieffen Plan* takes a pro-Zuber stance.

The book contains twelve chapters. The first is an introduction to the historiography of Schlieffen and the Schlieffen Plan by the editors; their strong anti-Zuber bias is quite evident. The second, by Klaus Hinderbrand, is a short, interesting discussion of the prewar European power structure.

The next three essays, by respectively Annika Mombauer, Robert Foley, and Gerhard Gross argue for the reality of the Schlieffen Plan. This is the heart of the book, especially the pieces by Foley and Gross, who details at length the provenance of the extant documents used in various interwar studies of the plan. Gross judges (damningly) Zuber's thesis against these sources. Mombauer cogently elucidates the modifications that Moltke made in 1914 to the original plan. Historians have criticized him for irrationally weakening the German right flank to strengthen the left, facing Lorraine, as well as the Eastern Front. She contends that Moltke was rationally attempting to update the plan based on the intelligence of the day.

After a chapter on the fighting in Lorraine and the Vosges by Dieter Storz, the last six essays survey military planning by other European nations at the outset of the war: Austria-Hungary (Günther

1. See *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2003).

2. Orig. *Der Schlieffenplan: Analysen und Dokumente* (Munich: Oldenberg, 2006).

3. In a review of *The Schlieffen Plan*: see *Journal of Military History* 79 (2015) 469–71.

Kronenbitter), France (Stefan Schmidt), Russia (Jan Kusber), Switzerland (Hans Rudolf Furher and Michael Olansky), Great Britain (Hew Strachan), and Belgium (Luc de Vos). While not directly pertinent to the Schlieffen Plan, these contributions clarify the context of its development.

As in any collection of conference papers, the value and relevance of the contributions vary. The essays by Strachan and Schmidt are high quality pieces of scholarship that should be read and used in university military history courses. Both authors focus on the relationship between foreign policy and military planning. Strachan criticizes Britain's political leaders for having "condoned the General Staff's continentalism without willing the means to the ends," and the Army General Staff for having "accepted a plan for war in Europe without managing to create a European army" (297). Schmidt argues persuasively that France's determination to attack Germany with superior numbers (supplied by both the British Expeditionary Force and rapid Russian mobilization) led inevitably to the plan to strike Germany in Lorraine, thus fatally downplaying the possibility of a German violation of Belgium neutrality. This article dovetails nicely with Storz's discerning examination of the Battle of Lorraine from the German perspective. The essay on Germany's planning vis-à-vis Switzerland is simply out of place in this collection and Kusber's on the Russian military is superficial.

The book concludes with a nearly two-hundred-page compilation of excerpts from German deployment plans made between 1893 and 1914, with accompanying fold-out maps. This alone justifies the seventy-five dollar list price of the volume.

Serious students of pre-First World War planning and the war's opening stages will find much that merits careful reflection in *The Schlieffen Plan*. They will not, sadly, find a balanced assessment of Terrence Zuber's provocative thesis.