DER SCHLIEFFENPLAN: INTERPRETING THE SHADOWS ON THE CAVE WALL

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I. Introduction (A Rope of Sand)

Field Marshal Graf Alfred von Schlieffen was Chief of the Imperial German General Staff from 1891 to 1905, and died eighteen months before the outbreak of the First World War. In the winter of 1905/06 Schlieffen drafted his final plan, *Denkschrift*, or memorandum as it has been varyingly referred to, and handed it to his successor Helmuth von Moltke the younger, son of the late Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke who led the victorious Prussian armies against France in the Franco-Prussian war.

Inspired by the Battle of Cannae, in which Hannibal defeated a much larger Roman army using envelopment tactics that resulted in the virtual destruction of the Roman army in 216 B.C., Schlieffen's plan called for a right wing envelopment of the French army away from German soil, which would bypass the strong French fortifications in Moselle, catch the French army in the open and destroy it.

When Helmuth von Moltke the younger assumed the position of the Chief of Staff, he made adjustments to Schlieffen's plan according to the changing political and military situation. He reduced the ratio of divisions between the German right and left flank in the west and sent more divisions to eastern Germany to defend Prussia from possible Russian attack. It has been on these adjustments that von Moltke's colleagues criticized him after the German attack into northern France fizzled in the opening months of the Great War.

However, in the past fifty years historians have had a difficult time deciding exactly what the Schlieffen Plan was or

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how it was altered. One historian, Terence Zuber, went so far as to question whether it even existed as a real war plan at all. The obstacle that faced western historians since the end of World War II until the mid 1990s was that very few original documents regarding German war plans remained. Many had been destroyed by Allied bombing raids or carried off behind the Iron Curtain. Gerhard Ritter's book, *The Schlieffen Plan*, contained one of the few English translations of Schlieffen's actual war plans. It was not until the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany that some of those original documents were recovered, reigniting debate on the subject.

Although I disagree with Terence Zuber's main assertion, I will show that the Schlieffen Plan, along with how it was altered by von Moltke the younger, has always been a tenuous idea. However, past historians have felt that the plan was common knowledge even while they played freely with the facts, bestowing on it a mythological quality. Even after the addition of primary sources in the 1990s, we are still unable to come to any kind of consensus on what the Schlieffen Plan was. The neutral countries Schlieffen planned to invade varies from historian to historian. Belgium is almost always mentioned, but Holland and Luxemburg appear and disappear throughout various books and articles. Sometimes the planned use of Italian troops in Lorraine is attributed to von Moltke the younger, but sometimes to Schlieffen. Some historians, like Terence Zuber, are overly sympathetic to Imperial Germany. Some, like Annika Mombauer, rail against German war guilt, forget what war they are writing about, and call the Entente the Allies. The goals of the plan, to march around Paris, encircle Paris, attack the French fortresses from behind, or push the French army into Switzerland, also cannot seem to be agreed upon.

In one sense, the Schlieffen Plan that has been described by historians for the past fifty years was a myth. What von Schlieffen and von Moltke the younger intended has been rewritten and mischaracterized many times. However, Terence Zuber's thesis that there never was a Schlieffen Plan is just one more surreal portrait in a long line of paintings based upon

paintings, each one clouded by age and getting further from the actual subject.

This paper is divided into four parts: an introduction, a section on the plan as described by historians from the beginning of the Cold War to 1998, a section on the revision of the plan based on rediscovered primary sources and the debate surrounding the Zuber thesis, and my conclusion.

II. The Plan, 1955—1998

In 1955 Ludwig Reiners, a German lawyer and economist, characterized the Schlieffen Plan in his book *The Lamps Went Out in Europe* as a military plan that took into consideration a two front war. According to Reiners, Schlieffen anticipated the situation in which Germany found herself at the eve of the Great War. "Chief of Staff Schlieffen," he wrote, "had horrified his associates by working out war games in which Russia, France, England, Belgium, and Serbia were united against Germany and Austria."[1] In this scenario, Schlieffen decided that the only chance for German victory lay in defeating her enemies quickly, one at a time. France had to be defeated in eight weeks with a single bold stroke. The vast majority of the German army would strike through Belgium and, "with Metz as pivot they would complete a gigantic loop…encircle Paris from the rear and, advancing eastward, drive the enemy up against the Swiss border and the Moselle fortifications."[2]

As for the fate of the Schlieffen Plan under his successor von Moltke the younger, Reiners argued that von Moltke watered down the grand plan and wanted to incorporate Italian soldiers in the defense of Alsace-Lorraine, but, "in strengthening the Lorraine defensive front, von Moltke necessarily weakened the offensive army."[3] After the German grand offensive stalled in northern France, and the subsequent French attack in Lorraine

[1]Ludwig Reiners, *The Lamps Went Out in Europe*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Pantheon Books, Inc., 1955; reprint, Cleveland, Ohio: Meridian Books, 1966): 165.

[2]Ibid., 166.

[3]Ibid., 167.

was defeated, "the railroad cars were standing ready in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan," to transfer men to the critical point in northern France, but von Moltke ordered a counter attack against the French fortress line instead.[4] The rest, as they say, is history.

In 1956 Gerhard Ritter published Schlieffen's deployment and operational plans in their entirety in his book *The Schlieffen Plan* along with his own commentary. This book has been the mainstay of nearly all writings on Germany's war plans leading up to World War I because it contained most of the only primary sources on Schlieffen's military thinking from 1905 to 1912 available to Western scholars until the 1990s.

Ritter characterized the Schlieffen Plan as "an offensive which would annihilate the entire French Army at a single blow and achieve quick and total victory on the Western front," singularly in a war against France, but the author argued the plan also fit into Schlieffen's strategic thinking regarding a two-front war.[5] In the event of a two-front war, Germany should decisively defeat the most dangerous enemy first, France, then turn and defeat the other, Russia. Over the course of Schlieffen's tenure as Chief of Staff, "the ratio of strength between the German armies in the East and the West was reduced from 1:2 to 1:4, and later to 1:8."[6]

Schlieffen's war games, according to Ritter, "seem to have been intended to prove that the left wing of the German army could be much weakened in favor of the right."[7] Schlieffen wanted to emphasize that a French attack against German positions in Lorraine would fail and they would be forced to march north to seek decisive victory, making them vulnerable to a massive German counterattack on their left flank.

However, "before 1904-5 Schlieffen had not decided to stake everything on one card and rely on the great envelopment,

[4]Ibid., 169.

[5]Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, trans. Andrew and Eva Wilson (Munich: Verlag R. Oldenbourg, 1956; reprint, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1958): 17.

[6]Ibid., 30.

[7]Ibid., 40.

cutting across Belgium to Dunkirk. On the contrary, it (his memorandum of 1899) even contains a caution against such boldness."[8] Schlieffen preferred to seek the decisive battle through Luxembourg and Belgium, close to the German deployment area, but in Schlieffen's memorandum of 1905 the plan suddenly changed. He extended the German right flank, siphoned more troops away from Lorraine, and included a strike through the southern tip of Holland. That change did not occur as a result of evolving French plans, Ritter argued. "Although the French General Staff was continually discussing the possibility of a German offensive through Belgium, there were no such changes until 1906," he wrote.[9] The genesis of the plan's alterations was strictly within Schlieffen's own thoughts.

After 1906, Schlieffen maintained the same strategy for both a one and two-front war. "The great envelopment on the right was to be the programme whatever happened, even if the chances of success were greatly diminished by drafting troops to the East."[10] For Gerhard Ritter, there was no question that this was Schlieffen's great plan, and that he had tested the idea in several war games and staff rides.[11]

Lastly, Ritter argued that an envelopment of Paris was part of the plan, but a part Schlieffen was unconvinced would be achievable with the current size of the German army. There was always a danger the French army could sever the sweeping advance with their own offensive, or that the British could land expeditionary forces behind the German lines, although that particular danger "caused Schlieffen very little worry."[12] Impressed by the audaciousness of the plan, Ritter concluded, "Nobody can read the memorandum without being affected by the breadth and boldness of its offensive concept."[13]

[8]Ibid., 41.
[9]Ibid., 43.
[10]Ibid., 47.
[11]Ibid., 45-46.
[12]Ibid., 71.
[13]Ibid., 48.

In his 1966 book *The German Army*, Herbert Rosinski provided a more detailed analysis of the Schlieffen Plan than Ludwig Reiners had eleven years earlier. The Schlieffen Plan, he argued, was born out of a desire to achieve absolute victory over the enemy through the destruction of the enemy's entire army—one of the goals of war laid out by the philosopher of war von Clauswitz. "By the Schlieffen plan's encirclement," Rosinski explained, "he not only hoped to achieve that decisive blow in flank and rear but to deprive his opponents in advance of any power to develop their initiative."[14]

According to Rosinski's characterization, Schlieffen's plan of 1905 fused "mobilization, operations, and tactical decisions into one single grandiose scheme."[15] The plan was simply to be unleashed upon the enemy and all the details would take care of themselves as the momentum of the attack never gave the French time to respond.

Like Ludwig Reiners, Herbert Rosinski blamed von Moltke the younger for the plan's failure, based on von Moltke's transfer of divisions from the right flank to the left. However, he contended that Moltke's previous critics had taken a "too narrow view of what Schlieffen meant by his plan. His successors took it in precisely the sense which he would have rejected, as an infallible 'recipe of victory' instead of a concrete, flexible solution."[16] Instead of scrapping the plan according to the needs of the changing situation, von Moltke hedged. Even with that in mind, Rosinski was unable to refrain from praising the original plan: "Yet, so brilliant had been Schlieffen's conception…that even in this emasculated form it came within an ace of success."[17]

In his often-cited 1973 book *The Short-War Illusion*, Lancelot L. Farrar, Jr. was more critical of the Schlieffen Plan and also added some details omitted by Reiners and Rosinski. A map

[14]Herbert Rosinski, *The German Army*, ed. Gordon A. Craig (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966): 129.
[15]Ibid., 129.
[16]Ibid., 135.
[17]Ibid., 136.

drawn by the Macmillan Company on page xvii, which illustrated the Schlieffen Plan of 1905, as it was now referred to, shows not just a march around Paris by the German army, but an encirclement of Paris. The map key reads: "this plan to invade France through neutral Belgium and to surround Paris was altered a number of times before 1914 and improperly carried out."[18] Here the conventional wisdom that the plan involved a strike through Belgium but was altered and botched by Schlieffen's successor is faithfully repeated.

"The German strategic blueprint, the Schlieffen Plan, was based on the assumption that Germany and Austria-Hungary would go to war against Russia, France, and probably Great Britain," Farrar explained, leaving out a hostile Belgium and Serbia from Schlieffen's strategic planning.[19]

Farrar laid out the plan in three stages: German troops would be quickly mobilized and move through neutral Belgium, march "generally southward" through northern France, then march east and encircle the French army.[20] Schlieffen created his plan in 1905 in anticipation of a two front war and relied on a slow mobilization of Russian forces. Unlike Herbert Rosinski, Farrar expressed less admiration of this plan. "The Schlieffen Plan might have succeeded only in circumstances which would have made it unnecessary (i.e., a one-front war against France)," he argued.[21]

However, Lancelot Farrar was more generous to von Moltke the younger, who, once hostilities broke out, he presented with two options: continue around Paris to the west, or swing east to concentrate against the French army. Moltke chose the eastern rout, one of two equally problematic options, but a choice that doomed the offensive. Furthermore, Farrar postulates that the outcome would have been the same even if von Moltke had

[18]Lancelot L. Farrar, Jr., *The Short-War Illusion: Germany Policy, Strategy & Domestic Affairs August-December 1914* (Santa Barbara, California: Clio Press, 1973): xvii.

[19]Ibid., 7.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Ibid., 8.

transferred troops from Lorraine to northern France. Farrar concluded that despite von Moltke's adjustments, it was clear to him that, "Moltke implemented Schlieffen's strategy."[22]

Eighteen years later, Robert B. Asprey, in his book *The German High Command at War*, attributed the addition of Italians in Schlieffen's plan to Schlieffen himself and not von Moltke the younger, as well as added a second neutral country the plan called to violate, without citing any sources for the information. "Under the terms of the Schlieffen Plan of 1905," he wrote, "the bulk of the German army would deploy in the west. Two smaller armies reinforced by Italian divisions would defend Alsace-Lorraine…the extreme right of this force…would smash through *Holland* and Belgium, *debouch* into northern France, sweep down west of Paris, and wheel on the enemy left."[23] (Italics added for emphasis.)

According to Asprey, the Schlieffen Plan had several flaws; it depended on divisions from Italy, which were not guaranteed, more troops than the German army was likely to receive, the plan "ignored the French army's defensive capability," and there were no alternatives provided if the plan failed.[24] As for von Moltke's adjustments, which now included preserving Holland's neutrality, Asprey argued they "merely diluted the operational potential of the Schlieffen plan without solving any of its defects."

Jonathan M. Kolkey, an American historian, wrote a fairly conventional description of the Schlieffen Plan in his 1995 book *Germany on the March*, and despite his insistence that the "historian must play the role of the meticulous sleuth who painstakingly sifts through all available evidence," he is not so meticulous when it comes to his criticism of the Schlieffen Plan.[25]

[22]Ibid., 15.

[23]Robert B. Asprey, *The German High Command at War: Hidenberg and Ludendorff conduct World War I* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991), 26.

[24]Ibid..

[25]Jonathan M. Kolkey, *Germany on the March* (Lanham, MD: The United Press of America, 1996), vi.

"Berlin's military strategy," Kolkey argues, "the co-called Schlieffen Plan, while certainly audacious in scope, remained perhaps beyond the technology of that era."[26] Additionally, he blames the plan's failure not on von Moltke's infamous adjustments, but on "a series of tactical mistakes committed by frontline commanders."[27] He furthermore claims the plan contained many risks, although he fails to elaborate on these. Merely repeating convention, he postulates a timetable of eight weeks for the plan to succeed without citing any references for this conclusion.

In his 1998 book *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918,* Roger Chickering uses colorful adjectives to describe the Schlieffen Plan. He characterizes the plan for preemptive war against France as "Schlieffen's obsession," which involved a "colossal strategic envelopment," and a "grandiose wheeling movement" that would violate Belgian neutrality, which was later expanded to involve a violation of Holland too.[28] Most importantly, Chickering introduced the concept of a revolving door into the plan. "The advance of the German armies into France…was to complement the retreat of German forces in the south, so that the French would be lured into a breathtaking 'reversal of fronts,' a strategic 'revolving door'," he explained without providing sources for the quoted phrases.[29]

Chickering makes much out of this new addition to Schlieffen's plan. Von Moltke the younger's only failing, according to the author, was to stand guard in Lorraine, robbing "the plan of its revolving-door effect."[30]

III. The Revision, 1999—2006

In 1999 Terence Zuber published his controversial essay "The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered." Using primary documents

[26]Ibid., 199.

[27]Ibid.

[28]Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21.

[29]Ibid., 21.

[30]Ibid., 23.

that appeared only after the fall of the Soviet Union, which had been unavailable to Western scholars until the 1990s, as well as secondary sources written shortly after the Great War, he concluded that what we have been referring to as the Schlieffen Plan not only was not the real German war plan, but that it was not Schlieffen's masterwork either, as has been claimed by historians since the 1920s.

According to Zuber, the Schlieffen Plan of 1906, which he maintains was "dated December 1905 but was apparently written in January 1906, after Schlieffen had retired,"[31] has been correctly characterized by historians as an attack by the German right flank into Belgium and northern France, which would swing "to the west of Paris, continually turning the French left flank, eventually pushing the French army into Switzerland,"[32] but he mentions neither a violation of Dutch neutrality nor supplemental Italian troops in Lorraine. Additionally, he characterizes the plan as a plan only intended to deal with a one-front war with France, not a two-front war as has been previously maintained.

Zuber contends that the histories of the Great War written by German officers during the 1920s held up the Schlieffen Plan of 1906 as the culmination of Schlieffen's military thought, contending that had von Moltke the younger followed it to the letter instead of watering it down, Germany would have won the war. However, they "revealed practically nothing of Schlieffen's other war plans written between 1891 and 1905."[33]

The three German officers in question, Lieutenant-Colonel Wolfgang Foerster, General Hermann von Kuhl, and General Wilhelm Groener, used Schlieffen's final *Denkschrift* (study) to defend their own conduct in the war and vilify von Moltke for what they saw as his failure. However, Zuber argues this was

[31]Terence Zuber, "The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered," *War in History* 6, no. 3 (1999): 268.

[32]Ibid., 262.

[33]Ibid.

simply a matter of writing Schlieffen's plan of 1906 into the official histories.

The Schlieffen *Denkschrift* bore little resemblance to the actual situation on the eve of the Great War, Zuber argued. Field Marshall Erich Ludendorff towed the same line as Foerster, Kuhl, and Groener that "Moltke followed the concept of the Schlieffen plan, but failed to execute the plan properly in 1914."[34] However, "Ludendorff had shown only that, with 54 divisions, the right wing in the real plan in 1914 was no stronger than the right wing in the real plan in 1905/6. The true problem is that the right wing in the 'Schlieffen plan'…contained 82 divisions…not 54. Ludendorff did not explain how 54 divisions were expected to do the job of 82."[35]

Furthermore, Zuber cites a Swiss historian named Hermann Stegemann, whose 1917 book on the first year of the war does not mention the Schlieffen plan. Putting two and two together, along with evidence from Schlieffen's final staff rides and war games in which he neglected to test his famous *Denkschrift*, Zuber concluded, "there was no intent to destroy the French army in one immense Cannae-battle. There never was a 'Schlieffen plan'."[36]

In 2001, Terence M. Holmes published a reply to Terence Zuber's controversial thesis. He argued that Zuber misread Schlieffen's *Denkschrift* of 1905/06 and failed to correctly interpret the document's context. Furthermore, he contends that the march around Paris, far from being the goal of the Schlieffen Plan, was merely a "conditional aspect," and that von Moltke the younger adopted "the broad contours of the Schlieffen plan" as long as "decisive victory eluded him on the borders."[37]

When Schlieffen handed his *Denkschrift* of 1905/06 to von Moltke the younger, "it was clearly intended to mark this solemn moment of transition, acquiring thereby the undeniable

[34]Ibid., 266.

[35]Ibid., 266.

[36]Ibid., 305.

[37]Terence M. Holmes, "The Reluctant March on Paris: A Reply to Terence Zuber's 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered'," *War in History* 8, no. 2 (2001): 268.

character of a '*military legacy*'."[38] Holmes reasons that if Schlieffen's plan had not been the culmination of his military career, as Zuber contended, he would not have bothered to bestow it on his successor in such a manner.

Terence Zuber maintained that the goal of the supposed Schlieffen Plan was to march around and encircle Paris, something that made it unrealistic for use with Germany's actual army and therefore the General Staff could not have taken the plan seriously, because Schlieffen's *Denkschrift* only dealt with the worst-case scenario. However, Terence Holmes contends that the march around Paris was not really the goal of the plan, it was a stroke contingent upon the actions of the French army, namely if it fell back on its second line of defense. The encirclement of Paris "is a conclusion that Schlieffen arrived at most unwillingly," Holmes argues.[39] Furthermore, he contends that the reason the march around Paris is not a feature in Schlieffen's war games or staff rides was because he "came to his unenthusiastic conclusion whilst he was working on the plan and not before…it was not because he took this perspective less than seriously, but because he did not conceive of it until the time of his retirement."[40]

According to Holmes, von Moltke the younger preserved the essential aspects of the Schlieffen Plan, but he firmly believed the French would attack in Lorraine. Therefore, he would not have needed to amass forces on the right flank large enough to make a march around Paris. However, "if the main battle was fought in Lorraine…then there would…be no operational role for the right-wing concentration, and so it is stretching a point to claim, as Ludendorff does, that Moltke remained faithful to the Schlieffen plan."[41] During the course of the 1914 campaign, Moltke did in fact issue an order to march on and around Paris.

[38]Ibid., 210.

[39]Ibid., 213.

[40]Ibid., 214.

[41]Ibid., 223.

"It seems improbably that this was an entirely spontaneous idea," Holmes argues.[42]

Holmes concludes, "for neither Schlieffen nor Moltke was the march on Paris a fixed objective. It was always merely a means to an end." Schlieffen's plan was to envelop and destroy the French army wherever it was found. "Moltke's pursuit of August 1914 was based on exactly that same principle."[43]

In his 2002 book *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan*, Terence Zuber further elaborated his thesis. Schlieffen's infamous plan was not the culmination of fifteen years of Schlieffen's military thought, he explains, "the so-called 'Schlieffen plan' bore no resemblance to Schlieffen's war planning at all…the 'Schlieffen plan' was invented by the General Staff to explain away their failure to win the 1914 Marne campaign."[44] Zuber again praises Stegemann's 1917 history of the beginning of the Great War, which he previously cited in his article as one of his principal sources, as a detailed description of the German campaign in Belgium and France. "The chain of events and Stegemann's interpretation of the causes and effects are logical and plausible," he wrote and applauded the Swiss historian's omission of the Schlieffen Plan because its inclusion "would only add a counterfactual element: that the Schlieffen plan *should have been* the German war plan (but was not)."[45]

Zuber reiterated his argument that all subsequent historians have taken the conception of the Schlieffen Plan from Foerster, Kuhl, Groener, Ludendorff, and most of all Gerhard Ritter, who adopted their views without looking into the circumstances or motivations behind their claims. "Owing to the recent discovery of the Reichsarchiv manuscript 'Der Schlieffenplan' as well as of a number Schlieffen's last exercises," he argues (sentence error apparently overlooking in editing), "a clear picture of Schlieffen's war planning emerges for the first time. This picture

[42]Ibid., 224.

[43]Ibid., 231.

[44]Terence Zuber, *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning 1871-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5.

[45]Ibid., 8.

has nothing in common with the genesis of the 'Schlieffen plan' described by the Reicharchiv or Gerhard Ritter."[46]

The author of the aforementioned manuscript was Dr. Wilhelm Dieckmann, who was arrested and executed in 1944 for conspiring against Adolf Hitler. According to Zuber, Dieckmann also believed the Schlieffen *Denkschrift* of 1906 was the culmination of his military planning, but "the information his manuscript provides leads to another conclusion."[47] What Dieckmann's manuscript really showed was that Schlieffen accepted the elder Moltke's plans for war in the west, and that Schlieffen intended to "launch surprise counteroffensives to encircle and destroy the enemy on or near friendly territory, and not toward deep penetration into enemy territory."[48]

In the same year, Holger H. Herwig took a less controversial view of the Schlieffen Plan by challenging Lancelot L. Farrar's *The Short-War Illusion*, in which Farrar argued that Germany went on the offensive to achieve a total victory over France and end the war quickly. Herwig, like Terence Zuber, basis his argument on documents recently released after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Herwig argues that "Germany's leading military planners fully knew that the war had every chance of being a protracted struggle, and that the vaunted Schlieffen plan was but the opening salvo in what was likely to be an exhaustive campaign of attrition."[49] Herwig also identifies Gerhard Ritter as the origin of the current view of the plan, that it had been enacted because it provided the German leadership with a short war option.

Unable to prevent himself from also responding to Terence Zuber in the same article, he calls the thesis that there never was a Schlieffen Plan, "utterly misleading."[50] "Not only Schlieffen's contemporaries," he argues, "but also the men who

[46]Ibid., 136.

[47]Ibid., 137.

[48]Ibid., 219.

[49]Holger H. Herwig, "Germany and the "Short-War" Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?" *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 3 (2002): 682.

[50]Ibid., 683.

implemented his plan in August 1914, had no doubt about the existence and authenticity of a Schlieffen plan."[51]

Returning to Farrar's *Short-War Illusion*, Holger Herwig argues that many German commanders, including von Moltke the younger, recognized that the future war would be long and protracted, a "peoples' war."[52] But, "once in office, Moltke quickly came to realize that no viable alternative to Schlieffen's desperate gamble existed."[53] Thus, he 'watered down' the plan and tried to protect Germany's heartland from this feared protracted war by reinforcing the left flank in Lorraine. Nevertheless, he was also convinced that Schlieffen's lightning strike was the only hope to prevent that long war, so he went along with the plan knowing it had only a slim chance of success.

However, Terence M. Holmes disagreed with Herwig's contention that the Schlieffen Plan was a reckless gamble. In a subsequent issue of the *Journal of Military History*, he argues that "Schlieffen's great memorandum of December 1905 does not stipulate a time limit for completion of the projected war against France."[54]

Following from that contention, Homes takes issue with the six-week time limit that has been supposedly imposed on the Schlieffen Plan by historians for the past sixty years. "Schlieffen did not give any such instructions for adhering to a precise and imperative timetable," he argues, but he is unable to give any explanation for where the six-week time limit came from, since it is not in Schlieffen's *Denkschrift*, nor do any historians cite where the number originated.

In 2003, Robert T. Foley published his essay "The Origins of the Schlieffen Plan," in which he argues there was a continuity between Schlieffen's strategic thinking in 1899 and 1905 as

[51]Ibid.

[52]Ibid., 688.

[53]Ibid., 689.

[54]Terence M. Holmes, "'One Throw of the Gambler's Dice': A Comment on Holger Herwig's View of the Schlieffen Plan," *The Journal of Military History* 67, no. 2 (2003): 514.

Terence Holmes argued in 2001, but there were also factors Holmes failed to take into consideration. These two factors, Foley contends, were "German beliefs about French deployment plans, and…the ongoing construction of German fortifications."[55]

In 1900, a German officer named Berthold Deimling was ordered to supervise the development of the German order of battle, Foley wrote, and in his memoirs he stated that something very close to the Schlieffen Plan had been put before him, only this time the flanking march was to occur through Luxemburg and Belgium, and "France was to be defeated quickly in a decisive battle, thus allowing units to be transferred to the threatened east."[56] According to Foley, Deimling was most likely describing one of the two German war plans of 1899/1900, *Aufmarschplan I*. "Although *Aufmarschplan I* is generally seen as a plan for war against France alone, there is evidence to suggest that it would be used in a war against France and Russia under certain circumstances," Foley added.[57] In its conception, *Aufmarschplan I* strongly resembled the famous Schlieffen Plan.

Furthermore, Robert Foley argues that any differences between the 1900 and 1905 plans can be explained by two factors. The first was that the German high command correctly guessed that the French planned on extending their lines along the Belgian border, but overestimated the strength and reach of that force. Thusly, Schlieffen called for an even stronger and more extended German right flank.

Secondly, the German fortresses in Lorraine had greatly improved by 1905, allowing Schlieffen to feel that his left flank would be secure from French counter attack. "In Schlieffen's view," Foley wrote, "modern forts on the left bank of the Moselle would 'release troops for use elsewhere'."[58] "Hence, only after 1905 could Schlieffen carry out a powerful enveloping

[55]Robert T. Foley, "The Origins of the Schlieffen Plan," *War in History* 10, no. 2 (2003): 223.

[56]Ibid., 223-224.

[57]Ibid., 224.

[58]Ibid., 231.

movement around the French fortifications safe in the knowledge that its left flank would be secure."[59]

Annika Mombauer, in her 2005 historiographic essay "Of War Plans and War Guilt," looked at the argument espoused by Terence Zuber's controversial thesis, and concludes that there was, without a doubt, a Schlieffen Plan, and that von Moltke the younger operated in the spirit of that plan in 1914. Furthermore, she argues against Zuber's contention that Germany planned to fight a defensive war, and seeks to demonstrate that "contemporary evidence still paints a damning picture of Germany's aggressive war planning in the years 1906-14."[60]

"Zuber has…been accused of distorting his sources and of employing disingenuous arguments," Mombauer contends.[61] She further argues that, even though the idea of an easy and absolute victory is certainly a myth, that does not mean that the Schlieffen Plan, which tried to achieve that, is also a myth. Mombauer also calls into question Zuber's use of the Swiss historian Hermann Stegemann as a source, whose account is "mysteriously given far more credence (and prominence) than those of more directly informed contemporaries."[62] "Other sections of his book," she maintains, "make do with no references whatsoever and are seemingly plucked out of the air,"[63] an offense that, I would add, Zuber certainly is not alone in committing when it comes to this debate.

Mombauer argues that all of Schlieffen and Moltke's contemporaries knew there was a Schlieffen Plan. In 1912 von Moltke wrote to the German chancellor and informed him that violating Belgian neutrality was the only way to engage and destroy the French army out in the open. However, Mombauer maintains that Schlieffen's original intention was to attack

[59]Ibid., 232.

[60]Annika Mombauer, "Of War Plans and War Guilt:: The Debate Surrounding the Schlieffen Plan," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 5 (2005): 858.

[61]Ibid., 859.

[62]Ibid., 865.

[63]Ibid., 865.

through Holland and Belgium, and von Moltke took Holland out of the equation in order to protect Germany from an "allied" blockade. "Eighty years later, Terence Zuber denies that such a march through Belgium towards France was ever Germany's intention, despite Moltke's clear statements to the contrary."[64]

Annika Mombauer's reasonable solution to the confusion regarding von Moltke's adherence or lack of adherence to Schlieffen's plan is to call the deployment plan of 1914 something else. "Of course, the plan of 1914 was no longer Schlieffen's," she writes, "but Moltke's plan."[65] There certainly was a Schlieffen Plan, but by 1914 it had evolved into a similar, yet distinct plan. She concludes that, "far from slaughtering a sacred cow, Zuber's 'controversy' seems increasingly to be about flogging a dead horse."[66]

Finally, in 2006 Robert T. Foley came back with a new article and offered to clear away the controversy by giving us "The Real Schlieffen Plan." He argues that a shift in Germany's strategic situation in 1905 required an adjustment of Germany's war plans. However, those changes were all made based upon Schlieffen's memorandum of 1905/06, so that "Schlieffen deserves to be remembered as the father of Germany's war plan, with all its strengths and weaknesses, in 1914."[67]

Foley, like Annika Mombauer, attacks Terence Zuber's sources. Zuber makes much out of Wilhelm Dieckmann's unfinished manuscript on Schlieffen's strategic thought. Foley reminds us, as Zuber had, that Dieckmann's manuscript is missing the section regarding 1904 and 1905. Regardless, "he shows how Schlieffen first introduced the idea of outflanking the French fortifications in July 1894."[68] Zuber rejects Dieckmann's premise that this idea culminated in what Dieckmann called the 'envelopment plan,' but Foley argues that "Zuber seems to

[64]Ibid., 871.

[65]Ibid., 877.

[66]Ibid., 880.

[67]Robert T. Foley, "The Real Schlieffen Plan," *War in History* 13, no. 1 (2006): 91.

[68] Ibid., 95.

believe that he has some type of secret knowledge that allows him to reject Dieckmann's conclusions."[69]

Von Moltke's deployment plans for 1906/07 were "clearly based on Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum," Foley argues, and was the result of Russia's perceived weakness after its war with Japan. "The entire German army was to be deployed in the west against France. Further, it was to launch an immediate invasion of the Netherlands and Belgium in order to bypass the French fortresses."[70]

However, Russia recovered more quickly than the Germans predicted, which forced von Moltke to make alterations to Schlieffen's plan. "The inability to strike the Russian army," Foley contends, "as well as the fact that any war against Russia would certainly be long and indecisive, forced Moltke to concentrate on France."[71] Von Moltke the younger feared a long war, but hoped Schlieffen's plan would bring Germany a short one. Furthermore, Moltke knew he would be unable to attack the French fortress line directly, so he was forced to stick to Schlieffen's 1905 premise. "However, while he stuck to the basics of Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum, as French plans changed, so too did German plans."[72]

Von Moltke the younger noticed the growing strength of the Entente, as well as the French army, and feared France might attack Germany. "Troops had to be found to guard southern Germany against a possible French attack," Foley argues.[73] Finally, as has been mentioned countless times in the past, he reiterates that von Moltke also narrowed the German front by planning to move through Belgium and not both Belgium and Holland. Regardless of these changes, the basic premise of the German war plan remained the same as it had since 1905.

[69] Ibid., 98.
[70] Ibid., 105.
[71] Ibid., 108.
[72] Ibid., 110.
[73] Ibid., 111.

IV. Conclusion (The Shadow on the Wall)

Paraphrasing Annika Mombauer, the Schlieffen Plan and its application in World War I seemed like something that did not need any reexamination, but looking at what historians have written about it over the past fifty years, I am forced to conclude that it does. Clearly Schlieffen had a plan, or plans, and bequeathed it to his successor, who modified the general concept, but, when war came, acted within the overall spirit of Schlieffen's plan. He did attack through Belgium into northern France with a strong right wing, attempting to envelop the French army just as Schlieffen had prescribed. He did not hold out in defense, he did not attack the French fortress line (although he did eventually when the assault on the right flank had clearly failed), and he did not attack south through Switzerland. Out of all his available options, he chose the one that was most similar to the plan he had inherited.

However, despite looking at the same evidence, historian after historian has changed the details or interpreted them in opposite ways. Gerhard Ritter seemed quite convinced that Chief of Staff Schlieffen tested his plan in staff rides and war games, but Terence Zuber, looking at some of the same evidence, insists he never did. Both of these historians cannot be correct. Historically as well as logically, Schlieffen could not have both tested his plan and not tested his plan at the same time. Similarly, Ludwig Reiners attributed the planned addition of Italian divisions in Lorraine to von Moltke the younger, but thirty six years later Robert Asprey felt free to attribute those Italian divisions to Schlieffen. Asprey also placed an eight-week timetable on Schlieffen's plan, but recently Terence Holmes lamented the universal imposition of a six-week timetable on the plan. Gerhard Ritter, who conducted one of the most in depth analysis of the Schlieffen Plan, insisted that French military planning did not influence Schlieffen's adjustments between 1900 and 1905, but Robert Foley insists that it did.

It is not unusual or amazing to read disagreements between historians, but what is amazing is that between 1945 and the mid 1990s no new information on the plan came to light, yet what

historians wrote about the plan changed in fairly significant ways. The primary information they looked at had not changed, which leads me to conclude that writing history is like a game of 'telephone' spanning years instead of yards. Each historian felt that the concept of the Schlieffen Plan and why it 'went wrong' at the onset of World War I was so simple that they were free to describe it however they wanted, as long as that description more of less conformed to something they had previously read about the plan.

In that way, I am sympathetic to Terence Zuber's argument that historians have picked up basic assumptions about the plan and repeated them until it seemed like they held an unshakable, literal truth in their hands. Regardless of whether Zuber is right about how genuine Schlieffen's intentions were when he wrote his famous plan, the outcry that came from historians after his provocative unraveling of their idea only seemed to prove his point, that he had "slaughtered a sacred cow," although his act of butchering appeared to only create a red herring.

For years Schlieffen's plan stood behind historian's backs as they jotted down descriptions of its shadowy reflection on the cave wall in front of them. We can only hope in vain that the recent reinvestigation of the Schlieffen Plan will finally yield a consensus.