

This is the Introduction chapter intended for the second edition of *The Plan That Broke the World: The “Schlieffen Plan” and World War I*, by William D. O’Neil. The only substantial difference from the first edition is the insertion on pages 6-7 of a section overviewing the roles of the various armies fighting on the Western Front in August and early September of 1914. The book’s Web site is <http://whatweretheythinking.williamdoneil.com/theplanthatbroketheworld/>

## I. Introduction

**F**EW PEOPLE TODAY CAN SEE much good in war, but World War I (1914–1918) has a particularly dreadful reputation. It’s not only that the war was responsible for the deaths of 16 million people, mostly young and many by uniquely horrifying means, but its effects marked practically everyone who survived (at least in Europe and North America), and continue to torment us even after a century. There was nothing romantic or glorious in this war; it did vast harm and scarcely any good. Even the scanty benefits sometimes claimed for it are largely illusory.

The causes that underlie World War I seem grotesquely mysterious. Did Serbian leaders really launch one of the most ghastly wars in history by dispatching teenaged terrorists to shoot a widely-controversial Austrian prince and his wife on a dusty street in an obscure Balkan town? What can they have been *thinking*? What can leaders of other nations have been thinking when they piled on?

This book will briefly review the background of the war and the actions leading up to it, but it’s really about why Germany’s leaders in particular felt motivated to enter the war and to do so with an all-out invasion of France, by way of Belgium. They put their confidence in what’s usually called the Schlieffen Plan, in honor of Count von Schlieffen, a former chief of the Prussian General Staff. Historian

John Keegan nominated it as “the most important official document of the last hundred years,” anywhere.<sup>1</sup> Those with much interest in military history will usually tell you that it was the brilliant and audacious plan with which Germany began World War I in August 1914, intended to defeat the French Army in six weeks.

That’s really quite wrong. Schlieffen played an important part in laying the groundwork for German war planning, but not the part that’s usually described. And the plan that Germany was actually pursuing was only slightly like the one found in most books.

It’s very frequently claimed that even though it led the German Empire to wreck and Europe to catastrophe, the plan was a work of genius that went awry only because it was botched by the men who executed it.<sup>2</sup> Yet even with the best possible execution the plan would have been far too risky for a bet-your-country wager. It wasn’t the best of all possible plans, very far from it. The German Empire had realistic options for pursuing its objectives and needs with much lower risk, options that wouldn’t have required knowledge, technology, or resources beyond what was available in the 1910s.

History is about what happened rather than what we imagine might have happened, but this book isn’t really a history, or at least not primarily history. It explores the question of why very smart, well-prepared leaders made catastrophic miscalculations. To understand that we need to know what the alternatives were, not just the alternatives that they thought about and rejected but the ones they implicitly rejected without any thought, at least conscious thought.

Not many decisions go wrong on quite the same scale as those made by the leaders of Germany in late July of 1914, but major miscalculations aren’t rare in human affairs. Studying German illusions at the start of World War I helps to illuminate not only the history of the war but what might be done to avert catastrophic miscalculations in the future.

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THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE of this book is to contribute to the exploration and understanding of the processes of large-scale decision-making,

not to history itself. I'm not a professional historian and have done none of the original archival research that is the defining activity of professional historiography. But an accurate understanding of history is essential in order to understand how decision-making truly worked.

And that presents a problem. Even people who have devoted a fair amount of study to the First World War often have little knowledge of how and why the relevant decisions were made, nor of the circumstances that shaped and constrained them. And it's not as easy to find correct and relevant information as I had supposed when I started work on this book.

For the past four or five decades the substantial majority of the professional historians who've written about the war have focused most of their research on its "ordinary" people, those who bore most of its burdens, endured most of its hardships and privations, and did most of its bleeding and dying. It was of course the efforts of this mass of people, taken in sum, that ultimately determined the conflict outcomes and the fates of nations and peoples.

Nevertheless, the course of their efforts was guided and focused by the decisions (or indecisions) of a far smaller group of political and military leaders. Theirs is not the whole story and we cannot say even that it is the most important story in any absolute sense. But it's the important story for the purposes of this book, and that's the part of the history of the war that it deals with. Specifically, it deals with the decisions of Germany's military leadership about how to pursue their nation's war aims and how they related to the national decisions for war and the ways in which the decisions played out.

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EVEN THOUGH THIS is not a history book as such, it has a lot in it that will surprise many people who have read about the war. I know that because I've tried it on sample audiences and listened to their reactions. For most people, including many historians, World War I is a story of trench warfare and the spade is absent here. Many people are surprised to learn that Mons, Charleroi, the siege of Namur and the forcing of the Meuse above Namur are all names for various parts of one great battle, a battle usually recorded as a victory for the

German Army, but at which it lost what was surely its best opportunity to conclude the war on favorable terms.

There's also widespread lack of understanding of the state of critical technologies in 1914, including motor vehicles, aircraft, electrical communications, and electronics. This isn't too surprising, given how rapidly these technologies were moving at that time, but it's important for the book's purposes to clarify their status.\*

There has been great confusion regarding the so-called Schlieffen Plan and its role in how the war came about and Germany's ultimate failure to achieve her strategic aims. Reports of the plan's nonexistence are much exaggerated, but serious misunderstandings of what it was, how it came about and mutated, and how it related to the actual operations of German armies in 1914 are common and often profound. The plan has to be seen for what it truly was in order to understand why the German leaders acted as they did.

Many points made here are by no means new, but can be seen in a new light. Arguments that Germany missed critical political, strategic, and technological opportunities were advanced by German historians and military writers even before the guns had cooled, and have reappeared periodically since. But important sources have been published and explored in recent years and it is, ironically, easier in many ways to assess the pre-war opportunities and perspectives objectively over the long term than it was from the opposite bank of the war's gulf.

Much of what I've learned in the course of researching this book has surprised me, and I've worked hard to ensure that it's right. I have searched out strong sources and cross-checked critical points.

Although not trained as a professional historian I have other qualifications of value. For a number of years I worked as a systems engineer on a variety of defense-related developments and as a result have in-depth understanding of the technological and technology-application issues addressed here. And I also served as a planning and operational intelligence officer on high-level military staffs,

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\* Chemical engineering also was progressing rapidly, and was very important for the war overall, but didn't figure in the decisions of 1914 and before, although arguably it should.

giving me a good deal of insight into how staff planning and execution work in practice, as well as how commanders and staffs look at military problems. Finally I worked quite closely with a number of top-level government officials who were seeking to resolve policy problems relating to war and peace. (In many cases historians look at military and policy problems quite differently, and while this does not mean that they are wrong and the generals and officials are right it can tend to hinder their understanding of why generals and officials behaved as they did.)

These are not common background experiences for historians of World War I and they're essential to this book.

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THERE'S ONE ASPECT of the historical picture that I should say a few words about because it's particularly critical, obscure, and contentious: the responsibility for the war. For a great many people, probably a clear majority, it's a question with a very simple answer: The German Empire started the war in a quest to dominate Europe, after the fashion of Napoléon. Many respected historians hold it, with some variations and qualifications, and some of them (and many other people) take quite strong offense at any questioning of it.<sup>3</sup>

I present an alternative view of the origins of the war that seems to me more consistent with the evidence, on the whole. But it's not a subject about which there can be any ultimate certainty.

In any event, I take no position on the question of German "war guilt." I understand guilt as a moral category that cannot justly or meaningfully be applied to a nation, few of whose citizens had means to influence its actions or even accurate knowledge of what they were. There were plenty of Germans who had much to answer for, as there were individuals in almost all of the other countries involved, but this is a book about the process and foibles of decision; those who wish to pursue moral philosophy must look elsewhere.

The book argues that the Germans had it within their power to conduct the initial campaigns of the war more effectively and so to give themselves a better chance of achieving their fundamental political objectives—notably including the preservation of the

German Empire. Some people may take this to mean that I think it would have been desirable for Germany to have prevailed in the war, but that's altogether wrong. The arguments are presented solely to clarify the extent to which the German high command failed to plan as wisely as it might. I certainly do not believe that the world would be better off if the Central Powers rather than the Allies had won the war. I do feel pretty sure that an early termination of the war on essentially a *status quo ante* basis would have been desirable but can see no particular value in arguing the point and have not written this book to do so.

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I WRITE HERE ABOUT the foibles of German decision-making. That's important in itself, but it's also a part of a larger historical story, the failure of the German attempt to defeat France and her allies in the west in August and early September 1914.

While the German plan had important weaknesses (as detailed here) the German Army was stronger in almost every respect than any of the armies arrayed against it. It failed to defeat France and her two allies in the west, Belgium and Britain, in part because of the weaknesses of its planning but also in part because the allies did some important things right. Belgium had been terribly shortsighted and her army was much weaker than it might reasonably have been, but her sons were brave and in their courage and tenacity they sapped the German momentum significantly. Britain's small army achieved much less than it might have with even reasonably competent and active command but her troops did the best that the dismal quality of their leadership allowed and they too contributed greatly to sapping the momentum of the German right wing.

France played the key role. Her army suffered terribly from doctrinal muddle and from inadequate investment in development and training of her large reserve forces.<sup>4</sup> The supreme commander, Joseph Joffre, committed his forces to offensives based on a fundamental misreading of his opponent's capabilities and dispositions, with extremely costly results. Yet at the critical moment, late in August, Joffre recognized the reality and made exactly the move Germany's master planner, Schlieffen, had feared most—

shifting major forces from his right wing to his left. This finally doomed German hopes of turning the allied left wing and enveloping the allied armies.

Perhaps even more important, virtually all of the allied commanders were alert to the need to pull back promptly when it became clear that the tide of battle was running against them. This may not seem like a major virtue but it was contrary to a fundamental assumption of German planning and made it impossible for the Germans to envelop and annihilate inferior forces. Thus the allied forces mostly survived to fight another day, and thanks to the resilience and courage of their troops were able to fight effectively.

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WEIGHTY AS THE IMPLICATIONS of its subject may be, this has been framed as a very brief, readable book. There are occasional explanatory footnotes but the end-notes (indicated by superscript numerals) are strictly for reference sources; unless you want to know the source of something said in the text, or where you might look to learn more, you can safely ignore them entirely. While many sources have been consulted, I've tried to cite only the most relevant and accessible ones. Sources are cited in full at first use and in abbreviated form thereafter. The Bibliography gives full citations for all sources used more than once, and for other sources that played a significant part in the research, even if not specifically cited.

Because it's convenient sometimes to look at a map while reading text with geographic references and inconvenient to be flipping back and forth in the book, I've made a booklet of the maps available on the Web. This map booklet contains large, high-resolution, full-color PDF images of all of the maps from this book. It is solely for lawful owners and borrowers of *The Plan That Broke the World*, either in paper or electronic form. To download it go to:

[http://williamdoneil.com/Plan\\_Maps/](http://williamdoneil.com/Plan_Maps/)

There is a glossary of terms and abbreviations at page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Personal names are mostly given in their native form and spelling. Many place names have alternative forms and I've tried to

use the one that will be most familiar to English speakers, or the dominant local form when that didn't seem to be a consideration. English forms have been used for most institutions, offices, etc., while native forms have been used for personal titles and ranks. Where applicable I've noted the English equivalents for native forms at first use and in the Glossary at the end of the book.

The caliber (bore diameter) of firearms is given in millimeters (with inch equivalents on first use). Terminology for artillery was varied (and sometimes intentionally deceptive); here any artillery piece that can fire at elevations from zero to no more than 50 degrees is referred to as a cannon, zero to more than 50 degrees as a howitzer, and no less than 45 degrees as a mortar.

Distances are in American statute miles (1609 m) or yards (0.91 m), weights in pounds (0.45 kg) and (short) tons (907 kg), and the power output of motors in horsepower (746 W).

States are referred to using feminine pronoun forms, a holdover from Latin that remains helpful in distinguishing them gracefully from institutions of other sorts.

My German was never fluent and since years of disuse have taken a further toll I've relied largely on translations, if only because professional translators are more likely to penetrate to the real meaning than I. A number of the sources in the notes and bibliography are translated from the German. Even though English and German share common linguistic roots, translation between them is by no means straightforward and there is a risk of serious misunderstandings. Wherever possible I have cross-checked key points across various independent sources; in a few instances I've very carefully translated key passages myself to be sure.

The book's Web site at

*whatweretheythinking.williamdoneil.com/theplanthatbroketheworld*

has a variety of supplementary information.

The Web site for the overall series at

*whatweretheythinking.williamdoneil.com/*

explains its unifying concept and provides further links.



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### 1. Introduction

<sup>1</sup> Keegan, John, *The First World War* (New York: Knopf, 1998), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Some ripe examples of Schlieffen idolatry are quoted in Mombauer, Annika, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Major historians who appear to continue to stand guard on this camp include Max Hastings and Holger Herwig, while the most commanding proponent remains the late Fritz Fischer.

<sup>4</sup> Lambelet, André José, “Manifestly Inferior? French Reserves, 1871-1914,” in *Scraping the Barrel: The Military Use of Sub-Standard Manpower*, ed. Sanders Marble (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).