

Name: _____ Date: _____

The Great War - 1914

Explain the following war plans from WWI.

- 1) Schleiffen Plan -
- 2) Plan 17 -
- 3) Expeditionary Force -
- 4) Plan R -

Explain why the war plans fail in the West.

Explain why war plans fail in the East.

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ONE

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In August 1914 the Central Powers of Europe (Germany and Austria-Hungary) went to war with the Allied Powers (Great Britain, France and Russia). Each country had a carefully prepared plan of war.

Germany's **Schlieffen Plan** was to defeat France in six weeks by invading at high speed through Belgium. Then the German armies could turn to fight the Russians, 1000 kilometres away to the east. France had **Plan Seventeen** – an all-out attack on the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine by soldiers trained to fight hard and fast, whatever the odds against them might be. Great Britain had a small but well trained **Expeditionary Force** ready to cross the English Channel to defend Belgium and France against the Germans. Austria's **Plan R** was to send huge forces across the border into Russia. Russia planned to do the same in reverse.

Each of these plans had been worked out to the last detail. The key to their success was speed. Every army was to be taken to battle in thousands of railway trains and would overwhelm the enemy by sheer force of numbers. The generals in every country were sure that

the war they were starting would be over in a matter of months, perhaps even weeks.

However, none of the war plans worked in the way they were meant to and the war was not over in weeks. It lasted for four years and three months – 215 weeks. During that time nearly fifty million men wearing the uniforms of thirty different countries took part in a world-wide war, the first of its kind. By its end, ten million of them had lost their lives and twice that many had been wounded or crippled. At least nine million civilians also lay dead, victims of murder, disease and starvation.

Perhaps the generals who made their careful plans would have thought differently if they had listened to the words of an old German general, Helmuth von Moltke, who once said 'In war there are always three courses of action open to the enemy, and he usually chooses the fourth'.

This book tells the story of how the war plans of every country went wrong because their enemies usually chose the 'fourth course' – the unexpected that nobody had made plans for.

GREAT

- disease and starvation;

RUSSIA

Russian attacks

THE WAR PLANS FAIL IN THE WEST



German soldiers marching towards the River Marne, September 1914

War plans in the west

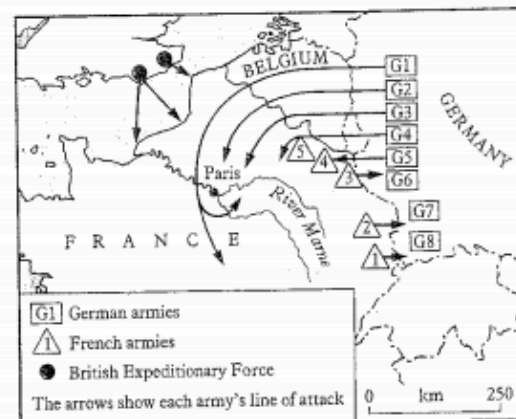
The Great War began exactly according to plan. A million grey-uniformed Germans were packed into 6480 railway trains at stations all over Germany. The trains began rolling at three-minute intervals towards Belgium. Farther south, three great armies of French soldiers in bright blue tunics gathered on the German border to invade the province of Lorraine. In the English Channel troop ships from Britain nosed their way into French ports and 125,000 khaki-clad men of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) streamed down the gangways, ready to march east.

It took only three weeks for the war plans to go wrong. When the German 1st and 2nd Armies marched into Belgium they met tougher fighting than expected. The Belgian army fought bravely and slowed them down for ten days in a battle at Liège. Then the British Expeditionary Force, which the Germans called 'a contemptible little army', slowed down the 1st Army in a battle at Mons. The British rifle-fire at Mons was so fast and accurate that the Germans thought they were being machine-gunned. For the rest of the war the BEF was proud to be called 'The Old Contemptibles'.

While the Germans were being slowed down in Belgium, the French were being torn to pieces in Lorraine. Their orders were to attack with 'élan' (speed) and 'cran' (guts) but they found themselves

charging at well-defended machine-gun posts. Speed and guts were useless against these and 300,000 French soldiers were mown down in just two weeks. Plan Seventeen had failed completely.

Now Germany's invasion of France went wrong. Far away in the east, the Russian army attacked Germany sooner than expected so von Moltke, the German commander, sent part of his armies to fight them. This meant he had fewer men for the attack on France. Next, the 1st Army, led by General von



The line-up of the armies

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... 1 "The British Expeditionary Force 1"

The arrows show each army's line of attack km

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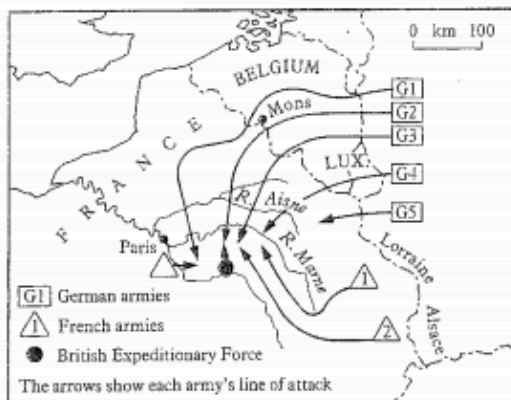
Kluck, ran into difficulties. As you can see from the map on the opposite page, Kluck's army (G1) had the farthest to go. His men often had to march 50 kilometres a day under a blazing hot sun, and they were exhausted by the time they reached France. Finally, the Germans found they were under attack from an unexpected direction, for now that Plan Seventeen had failed, the French were marching back from Lorraine to cut the Germans off.

The Battle of the Marne

Despite these setbacks the Germans pressed forward until they reached the River Marne. By 4 September some were so close to Paris that they could see the Eiffel Tower in the distance. For a while it seemed that the Schlieffen Plan would work. But then Moltke and the German generals made a fatal mistake. Instead of going west to surround Paris as planned, Kluck's army went east of Paris towards the Marne. It was this that gave the French a chance to save themselves.

As you can see from the map below, the French armies were marching west to cut the Germans off. To help them, the Military Governor of Paris, Marshal Gallieni, rounded up 250 taxis from the streets of the city and used them to send reserve soldiers to the Marne. Day and night, starting on 4 September, the 'taxis of the Marne' shuttled back and forth taking fresh troops to fight the exhausted Germans.

The Battle of the Marne



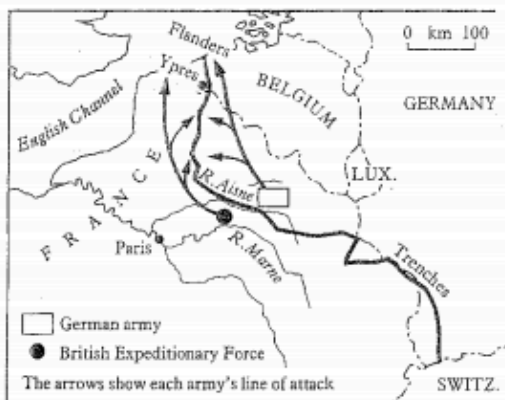
The Battle of the Marne lasted a week (5-11 September) and was one of the biggest ever fought. Two million men battled along a 240 kilometre front around the river. Gradually the French and the BEF drove the Germans back. By the end of the week they had retreated 60 kilometres to the River Aisne where they dug trenches and set up machine-gun posts to defend themselves.

The race to the sea

The Battle of the Marne saved the French for the time being and the rival generals now wondered what to do. Abandoning their original war plans they each tried to outflank the other – that is to get round the side of an army to cut it off. The French, the BEF and the Germans all set off north, hoping to outflank each other before they reached the English Channel. During this 'race to the sea', terrible battles were fought, the worst of them at Ypres. There the BEF stopped the Germans from outflanking them, but at an appalling cost. One British division lost 365 of its 400 officers and 10,774 of its 12,000 soldiers.

Neither side won the race to the sea so they started to dig trenches to stop the other from advancing. Gradually the lines of trenches lengthened so that by the end of 1914 they stretched all the way from Flanders in Belgium to Switzerland in the south. The armies could no longer move. It was stalemate.

The 'race to the sea'



Work section

Study these newspaper headlines of 4 September and 8 September 1914. Then answer these questions.

1. How did Paris 'throw up new defenses' on the day this paper appeared? Who was in charge of the new defenses?
2. In what ways did the German armies seem to be in a strong position on 4 September?
3. Explain in detail the second headline, 'Germans pushed back'.



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E] German army

3 British Expeditionary Force

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21:6 If the Imperial Guard is reported cut to pieces;

THE WAR PLANS FAIL IN THE EAST

War plans in the east

Just as the Schlieffen Plan had failed in the western part of Europe, so the war plans in the east also failed.

As you know, the Germans aimed to defeat France in six weeks so that they could send the bulk of their armies to fight the Russians in the east. When Schlieffen made this plan, he thought that Germany would be safe for those six weeks because the Russian army was slow and poorly trained, and would not be able to start moving quickly.

But Schlieffen was wrong. The Russians took only ten days to get four of their armies on the march, two heading for Germany and two for Austria-Hungary.

On 19 August the Russian 1st Army smashed into Germany and won a battle at Gumbinnen. On the same day, General Samsonov led the Russian 2nd Army into German territory. You can see from the map opposite that these two armies were closing around the Masurian Lakes, aiming to squeeze the Germans between them.

At first the Russians were successful. The Germans retreated in panic. Newspapers in France and Britain rushed out headlines praising 'the Russian Steam Roller' and predicted that it would soon be rolling into Berlin. Rumours spread throughout Britain that the Russians had landed in Scotland and were marching south to join the British Expeditionary Force. Countless stories were told of fur-hatted Russians marching south with snow still on their boots. Some were even seen trying to fit roubles (Russian coins) into slot machines in London!



Defeat for the Russians

In reality, the Russian steam roller had already started to break down. The German general in the east was sacked and two experienced generals, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, were sent to take his place. When they arrived at the scene of the fighting they saw that the two Russian armies were cut off from each other by the Masurian Lakes, a huge area of marsh and forest. Ludendorff immediately took advantage of this weakness and massed the German army for an attack on Samsonov's 2nd Army near the town of Tannenberg.

Fighting began on 25 August and for the next five days there was terrible slaughter. A German politician, General von Moltke, tells us in his memoirs what happened:

'The horrors of it are so ghastly that an

Russian troops crossing a river during the Battle of Tannenberg, August 1914



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Gumbinnen

1st Army:

General Rennenkampf

GERMANY

Beaten by the Russians

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eye-witness, an officer who has just returned, says it will live in his dreams until his dying day. The sight of thousands of Russians driven into two huge lakes or swamps to drown was ghastly, and the cries and shrieks of the dying men and horses he will never forget. So fearful was the sight of these thousands of men, with their guns, horses and ammunition struggling in the water, that, to shorten their agony, they turned the machine-guns on them. But even in spite of that there was movement seen among them for a week after. And the mowing down of the cavalry brigade, 500 men on white horses, all killed and packed so closely that they remained standing. The officer says this was the ghastliest sight of the whole war.'

After five days of fighting at the **Battle of Tannenberg** the Russians had lost 125,000 men and the Germans 13,000. General Samsonov, defeated and disgraced, disappeared into the forest and shot himself.

Now the Germans were loaded into railway trains and rushed to the north of the lakes to fight the Russian 1st Army. They were joined by reinforcements arriving from France. On 5 September they attacked and another awful slaughter took place.

The Russians retreated in mad panic, many to drown in the marshes, the lucky ones to their own country. In this **Battle of the Masurian Lakes** a further 100,000 Russians died. In all a quarter of a million Russians had been killed in the space of a month.

Victory for the Russians

Farther south it was a different story, for the Russians were victorious against the armies of Austria-Hungary. Following Plan R, the Austrians made a massive attack across the Russian border. They quickly captured great areas of land and their flag flew over countless towns and villages. But within a week they ran into five Russian armies and were stopped in their tracks. As heavy autumn rain began to fall, the Austrians turned and fled. Thousands deserted, leaving heavy guns and ammunition behind them. In four days the Austrians retreated over 200 kilometres.

This was a tremendous victory for Russia. They had captured the entire province of Galicia and were now in a position to attack Germany from the south. Moreover, the Austrians were also being beaten in their attack on Serbia (see map on page 6). Already a quarter of a million Austrians had died in the fighting.

Work section

- A. Read this account by the French Ambassador to Russia of a meeting he had with Tsar Nicholas of Russia in December 1914. Then answer the questions beneath.

'The Tsar lit his cigarette, offered me a light, and went straight to the heart of the subject: "Great things have happened in the three months since I saw you last. The splendid French army and my dear army have already given such proofs of valour [*bravery*] that victory can't fail us now".'

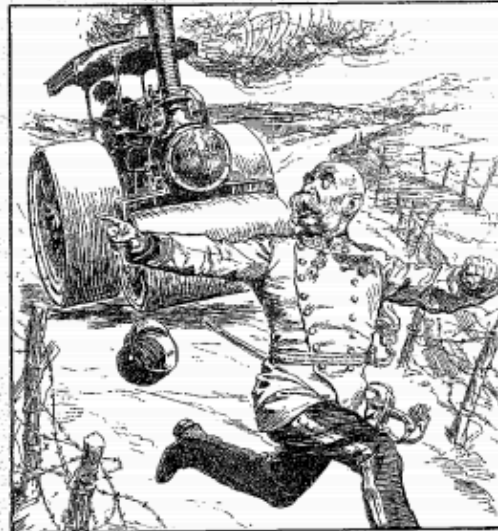
1. Make a list of the events that you think Nicholas had in mind when he said 'Great things have happened in the three months since I saw you last'.
2. Do you agree with Nicholas that the French army and his own army had shown such bravery that they were bound to win the war? Explain your answer.

- B. Study this British cartoon of September 1914 and answer the following questions:

1. Name the Austrian emperor who is running away from the steam roller. Which part of Austria-Hungary is he running away from?
2. Why do you think the cartoonist has pictured Russia as a steam roller? In your opinion, was it accurate to compare Russia with a steam roller? Explain both your answers.

- C. 1. If you had been in Britain in 1914 why would you have refused to believe the rumours that Russians were marching 'with snow on their boots' to join the BEF?
2. Why do you think millions of British people did believe such rumours?

- D. Study the photograph on the opposite page. Do you think it was taken before or after the battle of Tannenberg? Give reasons for your answer.



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