What Was Germany’s Schlieffen Plan?

Germany's Schlieffen Plan, named after its chief architect, Count Alfred von Schlieffen, was both offensive and defensive in nature.

Schlieffen - and the men who subsequently enhanced and modified his strategy, including Helmuth von Moltke, German Chief of Staff in 1914 - took as his starting assumption a war on two fronts, against France in the west and Russia in the east. The nature of the alliance system ensured that Russia was allied with France (and latterly Britain), set against Germany's alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy. Notwithstanding the potentially enormous size of the Russian army, with its never-ending supply of men, Schlieffen assumed - largely correctly, as it turned out - that it would take six weeks or longer for the Russians to effectively mobilise their forces, poorly led and equipped as they were.

Banking on this assumption, Schlieffen devised a strategy for knocking France out of the war within those six weeks. In order to do so he would commit the vast majority of German forces in the west to form an overwhelming assault with Paris as its aim, leaving just sufficient forces in East Prussia to hold off the Russians during the latter's mobilisation process. Once France had been dealt with the armies in the west would be redeployed to the east to face the Russian menace. In striking against France von Schlieffen determined to invade through Belgium; for tactical as well as political reasons, an invasion via Holland was discounted (Germany desired Dutch neutrality for as long as possible); and Switzerland in the south was geographically invasion-proof. Passage through the flat Flanders plains would offer the fastest route to France and victory.

Working to a tight deadline, five German armies would advance through Belgium and France in a grand wheel motion, turning through the Flanders plains north-east of France. The German forces would move from Alsace-Lorraine west through France en route for Paris. Schlieffen's often-quoted remark, "when you march into France, let the last man on the right brush the Channel with his sleeve" was based upon this turning wheel-like advance.
By outflanking the French armies von Schlieffen aimed to attack from the rear, where the French were likely to be most vulnerable. A small German force would guard the Franco-German border, enticing the French to move forward, upon which they would be attacked from the rear by the main bulk of the German army, assuring encirclement and destruction.

A side benefit of the Schlieffen Plan saw the bulk of the French resistance situated within France rather than in Germany. Even while retreating - which was by no means part of the plan - the Germans could (and did) entrench themselves deep inside French territory.

Whilst the French aimed to evict the invader from their country - and consequently constructed their own trenches lightly, never intending that they should be in use for any great length of time - the Germans dug deep, sophisticated trenches, content to remain where they were pending a further advance at some later stage. The weakness of the Schlieffen Plan lay less in the rigidity of the timescale - for the German army very nearly succeeded in capturing Paris within the time allotted - but in its underestimation of the difficulties of supply and communication in forces so far advanced from command and supply lines.

Ultimately, it was these problems, particularly in communicating strategy from Berlin, that doomed the Schlieffen Plan. The Allied forces could rush troops to the front by use of the railway faster than the Germans could arrange fresh supplies of food and reserve troops.

Most critically, Moltke's isolation from the front line not far from Paris led to a series of poor decisions and a crucial weakening of his forces in the north. A promptly timed French counter-attack exploiting a gap in the German lines at the First Battle of the Marne set off the so-called 'race to the sea' and the onset of static trench warfare. The rapid war of movement was brought to an end.
The Schliefflen Plan Questions

1. In a short paragraph describe the Schliefflen Plan.

2. What was the Schliefflen Plan trying to avoid for Germany?

3. Describe any problems that could be encountered by the Schliefflen Plan.

4. If you were Kaiser Wilhelm II would you have engaged in the Schliefflen Plan? Why or Why not? Use deductive reasoning and information from the text.