

1914—The First War Year

by Alfred F. Kugel

The Origins of the Conflict

Looking back to the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, in which Austria, Britain, Prussia and Russia combined to defeat the French Empire, there was an extended period of nearly an entire century without a major European conflict, providing an aura of deceptive calm. However, intense rivalries between the Great Powers lay just beneath the surface. There were many disputes and even some regional conflicts that were limited in scope and in the number of participants.

France and Russia were very desirous of restoring the honor they felt they had lost due to their respective defeats by Prussia in 1870 and Japan in 1905. Germany, which had been united as a single nation since 1871, and Italy (since 1861) were seeking greater recognition on the international scene. There was intense rivalry among all of the powers in the acquisition of overseas colonies and protectorates, as well as with regard to political influence in such areas as the Balkans, the Near East and Asia.

Although a grandson of Queen Victoria of England, Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany, as a result of his aggressive naval construction program, came to be seen as a threat to British control of the seas and its overseas possessions. This drove Great Britain, which had historically been an ally of Prussia and an enemy of France, to reassess its strategic position and become more favorably inclined toward the latter, even signing an Agreement of Friendship (*Entente Cordiale*) in 1904. As a result of all their maneuvering, in the early twentieth century the Great Powers had created two important rival geopolitical blocs, with Britain, France and Russia making up the Triple Entente, and Austria-Hungary, Germany and Italy comprising the Triple Alliance. Thus, by 1914, the stage was set for a major conflict.

As it turned out, the war was a massive effort involving the mobilization of 70 million men, of whom 9 million were killed in action and many more maimed or mentally afflicted. Contrary to all expectations, the struggle lasted for more than four years and was conducted over three continents and several oceans.

The Trigger

With the benefit of hindsight, the outbreak of what was then called The Great War (now known as World War I) looks like an event that was destined to happen. The spark that ignited things occurred in the Balkan “tinderbox,”



Figure 1. Mourning card for the murdered Archduke & Duchess.

when Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian and Hungarian thrones, was assassinated by Serbian nationalists in Sarajevo, Bosnia, on June 28, 1914 (Figure 1). After a month of demands, threats and rejections, Emperor Franz Josef declared war on Serbia on July 28, and the wheels started to turn as the system of alliances began to draw in the others like dominoes.

Russia declared war on Austria to support their Slavic brethren, thus requiring Germany to come to the assistance of Austria, which happened on August 1. When France followed by mobilizing to meet its obligation to aid Russia, the Germans declared war on them on August 3.

Britain's relationship with France did not include a military alliance, so it was unclear for a few days as to what it would do. However, according to their long-standing strategic plan, the Germans decided to get at France by an invasion through neutral Belgium, thus avoiding the heavily fortified Franco-German border area. When they crossed the frontier in the morning of August 4, the British demanded immediate withdrawal based on a treaty signed in 1839 by the Great Powers that guaranteed Belgium's borders (Figure 2). When this was ignored, Britain declared war that same night.

As to why the political leaders didn't take more significant action to head off the war, the most likely explanation was that both sides expected a quick and decisive



Figure 2. Picture card: German troops crossing the Belgian frontier August 4.

campaign in which they would be the winner. In fact, the Kaiser announced to the troops entraining in Berlin for the front that they would "be home before the leaves have fallen off the trees." The French expected victory in four months, and the Russians planned to be in Berlin by September. The British didn't announce a specific time line, but the public was allowed to believe that the troops would be home by Christmas.

The Schlieffen Plan

After 1871, the Germans long believed that another war was inevitable as a result of the French obsession with achieving "revenge" for the loss of Alsace-Lorraine. For this reason, a detailed plan of attack was drawn up in 1905 by Count Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the German General Staff. This plan called for the bulk of the German army to advance through Belgium into France, swinging around to the west of Paris like a giant pendulum and then moving east to trap the main French forces in a giant encirclement (Figure 3). At the same time, Alsace would be lightly defended, tempting the French forces in the East to advance into that area where they, too, could be trapped.

The plan called for the maximum effort against France, so seven-eighths of the German army was deployed in the West, leaving only one-eighth to conduct a holding

action against the Russians in the East. Although von Schlieffen, on his deathbed in 1911, warned that the generals must keep the right wing at maximum strength, that is not what actually happened.

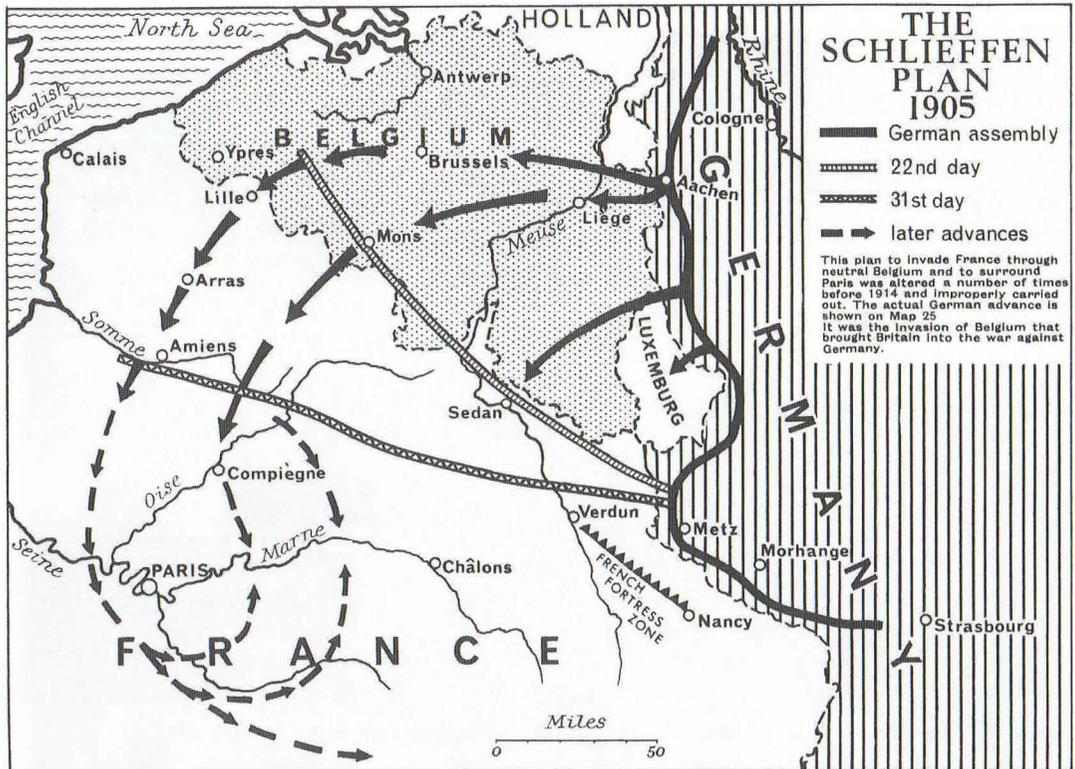


Figure 3. Map of the attack as seen in the Schlieffen Plan.

One of the aspects of the plan was a very detailed timetable, which established geographical goals for the German advance with the defeat of the French to occur in 40 days. In spite of the fact that the Belgians resisted strongly when only token action was expected, the Germans were able to keep to their schedule for the first 35 days, which took them well into France. In fact, Brussels was occupied on August 20 (Figure 4) and the first occupation stamps were issued on October 1 (Figure 5).

However, this was only accomplished by forced marches of the advancing troops, sometimes for several consecutive days, so that when the ultimate clash



Figure 4. Picture card: Germans entering Brussels August 20.

occurred, the men were suffering from exhaustion and simply unable to provide additional effort. At the same time, because of strong Belgian resistance, two army corps had been left behind to conduct a siege of Antwerp, which didn't surrender until October 9 (Figure 6).

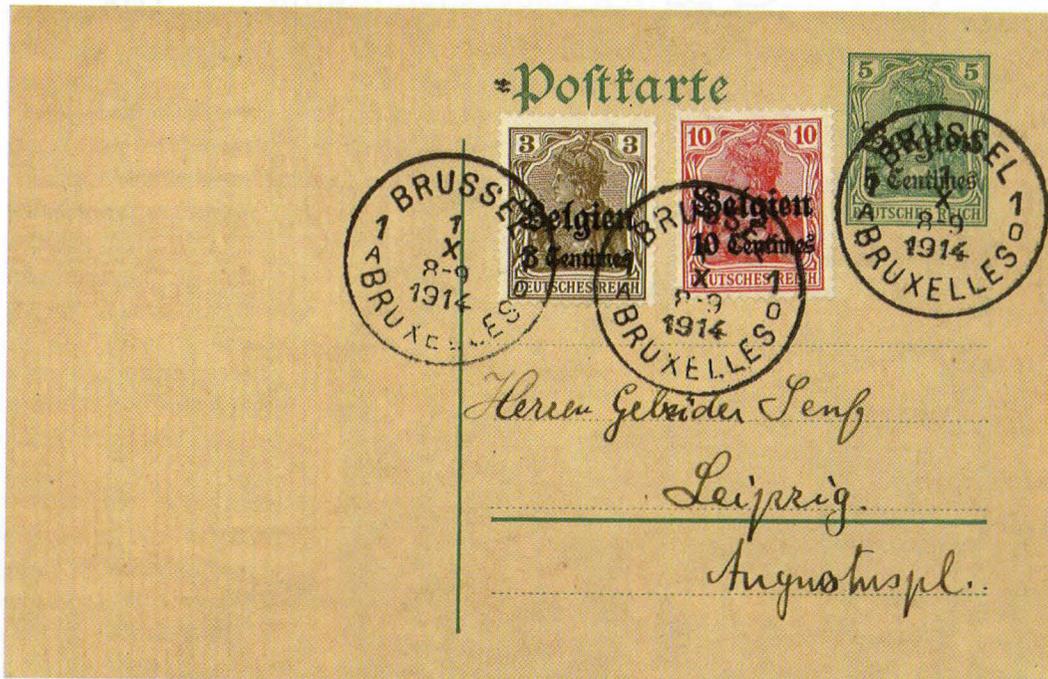


Figure 5. Postal card with the first occupation stamps, issued October 1.



Figure 6. German fieldpost card (postage required to a foreign destination).

When the Russians invaded East Prussia sooner than had been expected, the German commander, Helmuth von Moltke, feared an adverse effect on home-front morale so he detached two army corps from the right wing and sent them to the Eastern Front at just the crucial time. In one additional mistake, von Moltke assigned more men than necessary to his left wing as he favored an effort to occupy Nancy by a thrust out of Lorraine. As a result, the Germans ended up with a less powerful right wing than planned and they were forced to shorten the radius of their advance and turn east before reaching Paris.



Figure 7. Picture card: The French victory at First Marne September 12.

This move permitted French reinforcements, moving out of the capital by buses and taxis, to hit the German flank and force them to pull back. The result was that the Allies recorded a significant victory in the First Battle of the Marne on September 5–12 (Figure 7). Thus, Germany lost its chance for a 1914 breakthrough on the Western Front, which, as it turned out, condemned the combatants to four years of stalemated trench warfare involving enormous losses of lives and property without much actual change in the positions.

The French Plan

Not surprisingly, the French also had a long-range strategic program, known as Plan XVII, which also called for a knockout blow at the beginning of the war. Unlike the German swing around the flank, this strategy called for the bulk of the French troops to be concentrated along the eastern border for a massive thrust into the heartland of Germany via Alsace. The goal was to break through the German forces, leading to a crossing of the Rhine at Mainz en route to Berlin. This plan was undertaken at the opening of hostilities but did not succeed, as troops had to be shifted relatively soon to help block the advance of the Germans farther to the West. However, the French did manage to occupy a portion of southern Alsace, which they held throughout the balance of the war (Figure 8).



Figure 8. French fieldpost card used in liberated Alsace.

One positive event for the French occurred when Italy declared its neutrality at the outbreak of the war. Although their alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary called for them to join in if the others were attacked, the Italians argued that in this case they were not obligated to do so since the Austrians had been the aggressors in attacking Serbia. This permitted France to shift four divisions from defensive positions on the Italian border for use elsewhere.

The British Arrive

The British did not have a strategic plan but had long anticipated the possibility of a German attack on France. They drew up a Plan W, which was a logistical program for moving the first elements of a British Expeditionary Force to the continent very quickly. In fact, this worked as expected, with the initial movement taking place on August 11, just one week after they declared war. On that day the 2nd Royal Welsh Fusiliers landed at Le Havre and the 1st Middlesex Regiment at Rouen (Figure 9). Per the plan, the arriving troops were then transported by French trains to concentration centers near Mons.

This movement continued until August 23, when it became apparent that the Germans were about

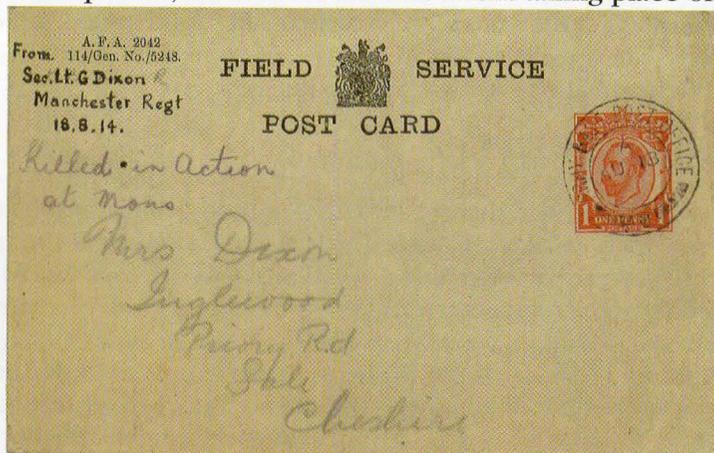


Figure 9. British card used August 18, the first day of P.O. operations in France.

to capture Mons. At that point, the Tommies had to pull back on foot more than 100 miles to the Brie area southeast of Paris. However, after the French First Marne victory, the British troops were able to move back north to the River Aisne and were subsequently able to prevent the Germans from occupying Dunkirk and Boulogne on the English Channel.

Action on the Eastern Front

The Russian general staff believed that their great numerical advantage in manpower would allow them to make an early breakthrough of the German defense in East Prussia by using two armies in a pincer movement to cut off the defenders from their expected fallback line on the Vistula, which would open the way to Berlin. The expectation of the Germans was that the Russian mobilization

would be slow and cumbersome, thus permitting them to strike the decisive blow against France before the Russians were ready. As a result, the Eastern front was only lightly defended with just 9 divisions deployed there as compared to 70 divisions in the West. In a major surprise, the first two Russian armies were organized quickly and sent to attack East Prussia on August 13, just two weeks into the war and before their own reserves had been brought up (Figure 10).

At first the troops advanced quite rapidly against light resistance. However, they soon outran their supply lines and suffered from not having an organized battle plan



Figure 11. Picture card: The Russian defeat at Tannenberg, August 28.



Figure 10. Picture card: Cossack cavalry crossing a river in East Prussia.

so that the two armies were essentially operating independently and not providing support to each other. As it turned out, even before the additional forces sent by von Moltke arrived from the West, General (later Field Marshal) von Hindenburg was able to score a decisive victory at the Battle of Tannenberg on August

26–28, taking 92,000 POWs and forcing the Russians to give up their best chance in the entire war to invade the heartland of Germany (Figure 11).

To the south there was a second Russian invasion, this time into the easternmost



И. А. Владими́ровъ. Атака татарскаго полка.

J. Wladimiroff, Attaque du régiment tartare.

Figure 12. Picture card: Tatar attack on Austrians in Galicia.

Austrian province of Galicia, where the action was much more successful. Striking to the south and west, the Russians were able to occupy much of the province and threatened to advance on Budapest (Figure 12). However, in early December the Austrian defenders scored one of their few significant victories on the Eastern front by launching a counterattack in the battle of Limanova,

which brought the Russian advance to a standstill. Nevertheless, they were not strong enough to force a Russian withdrawal. As a result, a second stalemate developed on this front at the end of 1914 (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Russian fieldpost card sent in December.

The Initial Attack on Serbia

Although the Southeast front was not a primary battleground, the earliest aggressive move came there immediately following the declaration of war on Serbia on July 28. On the very next day, Austro-Hungarian monitors moved south on the Danube River and began a bombardment of the Fortress of Belgrade (Figure 14). On August 12,

the ground invasion got underway and, in spite of strong resistance, a portion of northern and western Serbia was overrun during the ensuing several months (Figures 15 and 16). Belgrade was actually occupied on December 2 for a temporary period of about two weeks.

As it turned out, when the Russians advanced deeper into Galicia more quickly than expected, the Austrians

were forced to make a strategic decision to temporarily abort the invasion of Serbia and to shift the bulk of the troops northward for the defense of their own territory.



Figure 14. Picture card: Austrian monitors on the Danube bombarding Belgrade.

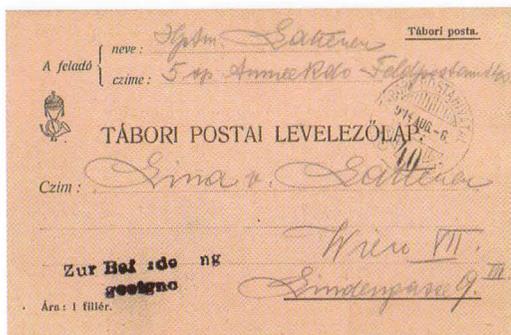


Figure 15. Earliest Austro-Hungarian fieldpost cancel, August 6.



Figure 16. Registered cover from first Austrian occupation of Loznica, Serbia.

As a result, the Serbs obtained a temporary respite which, however, lasted only for a little more than a year.

Action in the Pacific

Although in 1914 the primary war activities were in Europe as described, there were also a number of developments in the Pacific. The Germans had colonies in China (Kiauchau) and the Pacific Islands (Carolines, Marianas, Marshalls, New Guinea and Samoa). Seeking to grab some territory without much effort, Japan entered the war on August 23 and was assigned the task of occupying Kiauchau



Figure 17. Picture card: Japanese attack on Tsingtao, October 6.

(Figure 17) and invading the German territories in the Pacific to the north of the equator. One other aspect of the Japanese joining the Allies was that this enabled Russia to reduce the size of its forces defending Siberia, which meant that more men could be shifted to the Eastern front against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

British Imperial troops from Australia and New Zealand took on the areas south of the equator. The available defensive forces in all of these places were negligible, so the entire task was accomplished in a matter of weeks. For example, a New Zealand Expeditionary Force took Samoa without firing a shot on August 29, just over three weeks after the war started. The same can be said for the small colony of Togoland in West Africa, although the other African colonies would require longer campaigns.

Action on the High Seas

At the outbreak of the war, the Allies had a huge numerical advantage in warships, with which they quickly cleared the oceans of German naval and commercial shipping and established a blockade of the North Sea so that the Germans would not have access to imported supplies except from Scandinavia via the Baltic. Some of the German ships, then at sea, were sunk and others driven into neutral ports where they were interned. Some even came to ports on the U.S. East Coast, Hawaii, Guam and the Philippines. One notable exception was SMS *Emden*, which acted as a raider, sinking 23 Allied merchant ships plus a cruiser and destroyer over a period of three months before being hunted down itself.

As it turned out, the initial clash went to the Germans when one of its submarines (*U-9*) sank three British cruisers (*HMS Aboukir*, *Hogue* and *Cressy*) off the Dutch coast on September 22. However,

there was other naval action in 1914 involving two German armored cruisers, SMS *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, which had been part of the East Asiatic Squadron. When war broke out, they left Chinese waters and headed for Cape Horn and the Atlantic. On the way, they encountered the British cruisers *HMS Good Hope* and *Monmouth*, which were destroyed in the Battle of Coronel off the Chilean coast on November 1 (Figure 18). In turn, the German vessels were then hunted down by the British South Atlantic Squadron and sunk in the Battle of the Falklands on December 4.



Figure 18. Picture card: Naval battle of Coronel off Chile.

Turkey Joins the War

The Ottoman Empire had developed a close relationship with Germany, which had befriended the younger Turkish leaders who overthrew the old Sultan in 1908 and helped reform and modernize the Turkish Army following the major defeat in the First Balkan War of 1912. As a result, on October 3, 1914, the Turks signed a treaty of alliance with Germany. Thus, when the German warships SMS *Goeben* and *Breslau*, which had been cruising off Italy when war broke out, managed to avoid the British Mediterranean Squadron and arrived in Constantinople, the Turks agreed to “buy”

them so as not to require internment.

These vessels then received Turkish names and flags but continued to be manned by German sailors. Acting under orders from the German Military Mission, the warships entered the Black Sea on October 28 and bombarded the Russian naval bases at Odessa, Sevastopol and Feodosia (Figure 19). In turn, Russia then declared war on Turkey on November 4.

The most important aspect of Turkey joining the Central Powers was that it would open up several additional war theaters to which the Allies would have to commit troops that were sorely needed elsewhere. These were in Anatolia, Mesopotamia, the Sinai and Transcaucasia.



Figure 19. Picture card: Turkish/German fleet bombarding Sevastopol.

Summary

As described, the first declaration of war took place on July 28, 1914, and, by the end of the first week, all of the major European countries except Italy had joined in the fighting so that it had truly become The Great War. Several of the key participants had significant strategic plans, which they thought promised a quick and decisive victory. Unfortunately, things did not go as planned for either side. By year-end, the armies had reached the point of temporary exhaustion so that the fighting had bogged down on the Western, Eastern and Southeastern fronts, and it was unclear as to what would happen in the new year except that the battles would go on and the casualties would continue to mount.

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