

# Russia and the Eastern Front in 1914



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Russian troops on parade, July 1914

This article argues that Germany's main focus during the early stages of the First World War was Russia -- not Britain or France

**revanchism** A policy, usually a foreign policy, based on revenge to reverse an earlier injustice. In this case, France wanted the return of Alsace and Lorraine, which had been seized by Germany in 1871.

**Schlieffen Plan** German strategy, before 1914, to avoid war on two fronts by attacking and defeating France first, so it only had to face Russia in battle. It assumed Britain would not fight without France.

## Exam links

- AQA AS** Tsarist Russia, 1855–1917
- Edexcel AS** A world divided: communism and democracy in the twentieth century
- OCR (A) AS** From autocracy to communism: Russia 1894–1941
- OCR (A) A2** Russian revolutions 1894–1924 (coursework); Russia and its rulers 1855–1964
- OCR (B) AS** Russia in turmoil, 1900–21

It is often overlooked in western Europe, not least by those who planned last year's centenary commemorations of the First World War, that Russia was central to the war in two main ways. First, in terms of international relations, the war was primarily based on conflict of interest between Germany and Russia much more than German–British or German–French hostility. Second, in the military domain it is likely that, in the early stages of the war, Russian action was crucial in saving Paris. The aim of this article is to support both of these claims.

## Germany's war plan

It is almost instinctive for us in western Europe to think that imperial rivalry between Germany and Britain combined with German fear of French **revanchism** were the main reasons for the war. We could spend the whole article examining these claims from the western European perspective.

These particular rivalries did exist. However, Britain and France had also been rivals and had even come to blows over clashing imperialist claims in Egypt, Sudan and other parts of Africa. Nonetheless, they were able to put them on the back-burner in the face of the threat from a vigorous and expanding Germany in the very heart of Europe.

However, there is one clinching piece of evidence that the real war was to be fought against Russia: the German war plan known as the **Schlieffen Plan**. Germany's whole strategy in 1914 was based on quickly wrapping up conflict with France, so quickly that Britain would have no time to raise and deploy a significant army on the continent. Germany would then be able to get on with fighting the real enemy, Russia.

In particular, German planners had calculated that, as Russia became more industrialised and more wealthy, it would present a threat not only to German imperial and colonial interests, but also to the home territory of Germany itself. What made them think in this way?

## Russia's imperial threat

As far as imperial expansion was concerned, Germany was calculating that a logical, 'soft' target would be for it to expand in southeast Europe and the Near and Middle East. Among other things, this would not only bring vast economic markets, but would also open up the route to the increasingly vital resource, oil, from the Middle East. A Berlin-to-Baghdad railway was planned as the axis of this expansion. To achieve this, Germany chose to align itself with the declining Ottoman (Turkish) and Austro-Hungarian empires. Germany's new economic wealth and military power would put new energy into those declining empires.

The problem was that another empire, Russia, which was fighting hard to resist decline, had vital interests in those regions. The narrow channels between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, known as The Straits, were of vital interest to it. They constituted a crucial exit route for Russia's exports, mainly grain from Odessa, to Italy and other lucrative markets. Russia also claimed a protective role towards its **Orthodox**, Slavic 'little brothers' Bulgaria and Serbia, which had fought to free themselves completely from Ottoman Muslim rule by 1878. To see Germany encroaching in the Balkans, The Straits and on into the Middle East was something Russia could not contemplate.

Germany saw that it had to either maintain an alliance with Russia, as had been the case under Bismarck, or risk its hostility. From the beginning of the reign of Kaiser Wilhelm II, in 1890, the tendency had been to choose to support Austria-Hungary and Turkey rather than Russia.

## Russia's military threat

Russia itself had been embroiled in a war with Japan in 1904–05 which it had ignominiously lost. Since then, however, it had been using its growing industrial wealth to rebuild and update its armed forces through the so-called 'Great Programme'. The new initiative aimed to improve Russia's ability to **mobilise** its vast but far-flung population more quickly in the event of war and to re-equip its army and, especially, its navy, not only to replace the losses but to make them invincible.

Planners in Berlin had calculated that by 1916 the Russian military would be sufficiently powerful to resist a German attack. This meant there were only a few years left in which Germany could launch a **pre-emptive war** to defeat the Russian threat. The Schlieffen Plan was designed to allow this to happen by knocking out Russia's chief ally, France, which would deter Britain from joining in. This would then release Germany to attack Russia without having to face its greatest fear, that of fighting a war on two fronts. That would have meant, in effect, fighting two major wars at once, a near-suicidal undertaking.

The main implication was that, in the German plan, there would have been no Western Front. It would not have had a chance to form. France, according to the plan, would have fallen within the 4 to 6 weeks German planners thought it would take Russia to mobilise its forces. The failure of this plan was not just down to resistance on the Western Front; it had a great deal to do with Russia's performance in the east.

**Orthodoxy** A branch of the Christian Church which separated from Rome in the tenth century and came to dominate Eastern Europe including Greece and much of the Slavic world, notably Russia, Ukraine and the eastern Balkans.

**mobilisation** Process which puts a nation on a war footing, usually including preparing its military forces for action, securing advanced positions and calling up conscripts and reserves. It results in the highest state of readiness prior to actually declaring war.

**pre-emptive war** Attacking a potential enemy before they can mount their own attack.

A brigade of Russian infantry marching toward Kraków at the start of the First World War



The German generals Hindenburg (left) and Ludendorff during the First World War



### Russia's military action

First of all, Russia mobilised more quickly and more successfully than expected, even by comparison with its own expectations. There were protests and even riots against conscription in some places. They were usually transient affairs based on the fact that young peasants were being called up in the middle of the harvest season. They quickly died down and the military authorities, expecting some 20% of conscripts to fail to show up in the first instance, were actually overwhelmed by more recruits than they expected, so great was the patriotic surge in the population.

The main Russian military action came quickly. On 20 August, at Gumbinnen in East Prussia, a German advance was met by Russian troops who forced the German forces to retreat. The German reverse opened up the way for the Russian First Army, commanded by General Rennenkampf, and the Second Army, commanded by General Samsonov, to begin their

advance. Very briefly they were able to penetrate further across the German border into East Prussia.

### Germany defeats the Russian Second Army

The German High Command, led by von Moltke, replaced von Prittwitz, the commander who had ordered the retreat at Gumbinnen, and sent out two of Germany's best-known generals, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, to deal with the situation.

German military fortunes turned around very quickly. Hindenburg and Ludendorff arrived in the battle zone on 23 August. Ludendorff immediately took a bold but risky initiative, based on the sad but true assumption that the two Russian armies in the field would fail to coordinate their actions because of personal spite and jealousy between the two commanders, Rennenkampf and Samsonov.

Ludendorff attacked the Russian Second Army near Allenstein (today Olsztyn in Poland) and destroyed it in a week of intense fighting. Only 10,000 Russians escaped the battlefield: 78,000 were killed or wounded and 92,000 were captured. So burdensome was the defeat that Samsonov committed suicide on 29 August. Though it was some 20 miles away, Hindenburg called the battle 'Tannenberg' in honour of a great historic defeat of the Teutonic Knights.

### Germany defeats the Russian First Army

Rennenkampf's First Army, however, was still a threat. Ludendorff, buoyed up by his initial victory, was confident he could deal with it. However, in a crucial decision, von Moltke, believing that no chances could be taken since sovereign German territory was being invaded, sent the German strategic reserve to the Eastern Front. This force had been held in reserve to bolster either the Eastern or Western Front, depending on how the war was going. He even withdrew troops from the battle for Paris in the west.

'Battle of Tannenberg': Russian soldiers who surrendered are waiting to be led away; at the back are German soldiers



Ludendorff opposed the decision on two grounds. First, he could manage without them because they would arrive too late to make a difference. Second, they were needed much more in the west, to ensure the fall of Paris and the achievement of the Schlieffen Plan. He was right on both counts. At the first Battle of the Masurian Lakes (9–14 September) the Russian First Army was forced back over its own frontier.

German armies now threatened Russia rather than the other way round. Russia's victory had turned into catastrophic defeat within 6 weeks. From that point on the war went disastrously for Russia. Its armies were beaten back. Great swathes of territory were lost. A tide of refugees and deportees clogged the roads and railways. The final phase of the collapse of Tsarism had begun.

### The impact of Russia's brief success

However, the brief successes of the Russian Army, perhaps ironically, had a major influence on the Western Front. While we cannot know for certain what might have happened, it is very likely that removing troops from the west and reinforcing the east was a gigantic blunder by von Moltke. Had the troops remained on the Western Front, they could well have made all the difference. The desperately close battle to defend Paris might have gone the other way. If so, the Schlieffen Plan would have worked.

### Further reading

- Read, C. (2013) *War and Revolution in Russia, 1914–22*, Palgrave Macmillan, Chapter 2.  
 Stone, N. (1975) *The Eastern Front, 1914–17*, Hodder and Stoughton, Chapter 3.  
 Russia's Great War and Revolution website:  
<http://russiasgreatwar.org>

France would have had to sue for peace. The still small British Expeditionary Force would have had to withdraw. There would have been no Western Front. The war in the west would have ended in a German victory with countless consequences.

By advancing quickly, the Russian armies had disrupted this scenario. They had saved Paris and ultimately opened the door for Allied victory. Unfortunately, from their point of view, they were unable to do the same for themselves and Russia eventually collapsed to a disastrous defeat.

Professor Christopher Read is a member of the history department at the University of Warwick. His most recent book is *War and Revolution in Russia, 1914–22* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). He is currently writing a biography of Stalin for the Routledge Historical Biographies series.

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