

Essay Proposal: Railway Development and German War Planning, 1870-1914

Quote:

As Moltke always knew it would, the logistical support for the German army soon proved insufficient. Schlieffen had assumed that use could be made of Belgian, French and Dutch railways, but the Dutch had been excluded from the equation and the Belgian rail lines were extensively damaged during the German advance. The critical distance between the marching columns and Germany's own railheads stretched to an average of 70-80 miles in the case of Alexander von Kluck's First Army. By the end of the campaign, Karl von Bulow's Second Army was 105 miles from its original railheads. As they marched deeper into France, the intense summer heat took its toll on the German infantry and the poor roads took similar toll on their boots as they endeavoured to keep to the timetable by covering an average of fifteen miles a day.¹

Question:

This essay will attempt to answer one or more of the following questions: Was the development of German railroads in the late nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth century undertaken for the benefit of the economy or to support military strategies such as the Schlieffen Plan? If they were developed for military use, was the Schlieffen Plan consequently too reliant on the use of the railways in foreign countries, particularly Belgium and France, given that the Germans did not control these countries in peacetime? Finally, was the Schlieffen Plan too reliant on the presumed success of the railways in moving troops and supplies into France in order to defeat the Entente within the six week period that was demanded by German war planning?

Historical Background:

Historian A. J. P. Taylor believes that German railway development and the Schlieffen Plan itself were among the main causes of the First World War. Taylor believes both the railways and the Schlieffen Plan were developed as a means of advancing German military strategies, a purpose that overrode any economic benefits that

¹ Ian F. W. Beckett, *The Great War 1914-1918* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2001), 55.

might result from their construction. Many have argued against Taylor's theories, most notably Dennis Showalter. Showalter argues that the Germans developed their railways in order to support their expanding industrial sector. He further argues that although the Germans certainly foresaw a military use for the railways, this was never the primary reason for their development. Showalter goes on to argue that many officers of the German General Staff – the organization responsible for German war planning prior to 1914 – were reluctant to form plans that depended on foreign railways, as these lines would remain beyond their control prior to the outbreak of hostilities and therefore could not be depended upon in time of war.

The tendency of the Schlieffen Plan to rely so heavily on railways for mobilization and logistics, I will argue, is due in large part to Germany's great victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. In that brief, successful war with France, the Germans enjoyed great success in transferring men and supplies to the front in support of the advance on Paris. This is why many believe the Germans continued to develop the Schlieffen Plan and perhaps became too reliant on their own and foreign railways in their plans for fighting a war on two fronts. When the Schlieffen Plan was created, it was intended to eliminate France and Russia separately in order to avoid having to fight both simultaneously. Having developed complex railway mobilization schemes in advance, Germany would be capable of transferring men and supplies between the eastern and western fronts with relative ease. This essay will assess the degree to which this rigidity of planning presented a liability to German war planning in 1914.

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