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Tannenberg

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TANNENBERG

BY

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Even before 1871 the problem of a two-front war had played a major role in the consideration of the Prussian General Staff, and the establishment of the German Empire only complicated the issue. In a diary entry of April 27, 1871, Count von Moltke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, said: "The most dangerous trial the new German Empire could face would be simultaneous war with France and Russia.... The possibility of such a complication is not to be denied." Throughout his tenure as Chief of Staff this fear was reflected in his war plans. However, his views on the main enemy, as well as on the strategy to be employed, varied with the changes in the overall European situation. In a very detailed plan drawn up in 1871 for the contingency (then considered unlikely) of a two-front war, Moltke rejected the concept of attempting to win a quick victory in the West. Germany had just seen how difficult it had been to crush France even when she was unsupported. Therefore, he proposed to split the German Army into two approximately equal forces and await favorable opportunities to

1 Margaret Goldsmith and Frederick Voigt, Hindenburg, the Man and the Legend (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., 1930), p. 75.


3 Approximately 9 corps (270,000 men) were to be assigned to the Eastern Front, 9½ (300,000 men) to the Western. See, Eberhard Kessel, Moltke (Stuttgart: K.P. Koehler Verlag, 1957), p. 622.
deliver offensive thrusts against either front. The efficient German Army could be ready to attack by about M+13. In addition to this, however, Moltke felt it necessary "to consider defensive measures in good time." Alone, Germany would be able to do little against Russia at first. However, with Austrian aid an offensive in the East would have real possibility of success. Besides, the German western frontier was very suitable for defensive operations. If pressed too hard, the German western army could always retire to the easily-defended Rhine barrier. Furthermore, if France tried to make a flank attack through Belgium, the political advantage accruing to Germany would almost outweigh the military advantages France would gain. Moltke's determination to stand on the defensive in the West was further strengthened by France's rapid recovery during the 1870's. In 1879 he wrote:

If we must fight two wars 150 Meilen apart, then we should exploit in the West the great advantages which the Rhine and our powerful fortifications offer to the defensive, and should employ all fighting forces which are not absolutely indispensable for an imposing offensive against the East.

The conclusion of the alliance with Austria in 1879 made an Eastern offensive even more likely. It appeared definite to Moltke that Russia could not be overthrown completely in a brief

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5. Throughout this paper the term Mobilisierungstage has been translated as "M+" the appropriate number of days.
7. Goldsmith and Voigt, 75-76.
campaign. But on the other hand, the chances of knocking her out of the war in a relatively short time were good—if the war was conceived as one of limited aims. Considering Russia’s size, a battle of annihilation was not a reasonable possibility. Attempting to achieve it could lead only to futility. But a series of powerful attacks against the Russian armies in the Western Provinces combined with a systematic effort to encourage insurrection among her subject peoples could completely and easily disorganize her war effort. Given these circumstances, the Russian government would in all likelihood be amenable to negotiations if Germany offered reasonable terms.

All of Moltke’s latter Aufmarschpläne were based on the primary assumption of an offensive in the East. Its vast territory, so difficult to defend, offered wide scope for offensive operations. The East Prussian salient might be threatened with immediate strangulation by a Russian blow at its base, but, on the other hand, it provided an excellent sally-port against either a Russian concentration in Poland or an advance from Kovno. The situation in Galicia was little different. Moltke believed the best way to defend the 750-kilometer frontier from Lyck to Katowice was to attack first, disposing the assault forces over a wide arc and meeting somewhere on enemy soil. Despite this, however, Moltke was not yet certain he could depend on Austria. Even after the Dual Alliance had been concluded, he feared the main Austrian

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9 Beck, 158.
10 Craig, 275-276.
army would remain on the defensive along the Carpathians instead of advancing into Galicia and Poland. Their contribution would be important; Moltke hoped it would reach 600,000 men by M+24. This force, added to Ostheer, would give the allies decisive superiority in the early weeks, since according to the best estimates, Russia would be able to deploy no more than 640,000 men in the theater of war by M+24. By M+60, both sides would have around 1.2 million men, but it was hoped that by then the first decisive battles would be over.

The last, most improved development of Moltke's thoughts on the Eastern offensive is probably embodied in his final operations plan of February, 1888. In this plan about one-third of Germany's strength (7 corps, 5 reserve divisions, 5 cavalry divisions) was to be deployed in the East. Austria was to supply about 600,000 more men. Opposed to this force of about 950,000, Russia would at first deploy only 750,000; the slow Russian mobilization and the poor Russian railway system made it extremely unlikely that this force could be increased very rapidly.

Moltke planned to deploy the German Ostheer in two separate sectors. The main concentration of 236,000 men was to advance from Thorn-Ortelsburg; a weaker force of 115,000 would deploy on

12 Kessel, 675.
13 In the Kriegsplan of 1880 the Ostheer had been reduced to 9 corps, $\frac{5}{2}$ reserve divisions, and 6 cavalry divisions, a change occasioned by the rapid improvement of the French Army.
the line Lynck-Gumbinnen. Since the greatest danger the allies faced, according to Moltke, was a Russian blow from the Warsaw salient, they should take advantage of their faster mobilization to neutralize this salient. Both German armies, therefore, were to be ready to move forward by M+18. One would strike the lower Narew with the aim of neutralizing the Russian forces in the area Pultusk-Ostrolenka. The other was to screen this advance against an offensive from the Niemen. If this army was forced to retire, it was imperative that it withdraw to the west, on Allenstein-Ortelsburg and not on Königsberg. At all costs the rear of the attack on the Narew must be protected. Only if the Russians on the Niemen did not advance would it be possible to withdraw troops from this area to reinforce the blow against the Narew.

The goal of the plan was a concentric blow from north and south on a relatively unprepared enemy. Moltke knew, however, that this could be achieved only if the Austrians undertook a simultaneous offensive. For years Moltke had urged the necessity of a rapid Austrian thrust against Russia and the abandonment of the previous defensive orientation of Austria's war plan. Even if the offensive ended in a frontal battle, he said the Allied prospects for victory would be good. A successful battle of this type would present the possibility of winning a shorter defense line along the Bug and the Narew Rivers. It would remove the im-

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15 Ibid., 42-43.
mediate threat to German and Austrian territory posed by the Warsaw salient. Finally, it would secure a far-reaching freedom of action for the allies—an important point in a two-front war.

Moltke, therefore, bent every effort to secure Austrian cooperation. His Quartermaster-General, Waldersee, visited the Austrian Chief of Staff, Feldzugmeister Beck, on August 3, 1882, to assure him that no matter what happened in the West, the main German strength would be employed in the East. By M+20 at the latest, Waldersee said, the German offensive against the Narew would be underway. On September 8, 1882, Moltke himself conferred with Beck in Breslau, re-emphasizing the importance of a rapid Austrian offensive and confirming the guarantees given by Waldersee. He found a willing collaborator in Beck. An experienced and aggressive officer, he had since 1881 been working on his own plans for an offensive against Russia. However, he had been handicapped by lack of specific information about the German intentions. With solid guarantees of German support, he made a real effort during the next four years to improve Austria's readiness for war. By the end of Moltke's term as Chief of Staff, the Austrian army, though not nearly as efficient as that of its ally, was in no way inferior to the Russian.

The war scare of 1887 also played a great part in solidifying

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17 Beck, 176-177.
19 Ibid., 284-289.
the alliance. On June 24, 1887, von der Goltz wrote to Waldersee that "the cooperation of Austria with us in a Russian war seems fully assured." On December 3 of the same year Major von Deines, the German military attaché in Vienna, submitted a long report to Waldersee. In it he echoed Goltz' confidence in Austria's willingness, but expressed certain reservations concerning her ability. He emphasized the importance of simultaneous operations—in his opinion it would be "a serious error" to leave to Austria the uncertain chance of making the first attack alone. On the other hand, Beck's memo to Franz Josef, sent on December 9, expressed doubt as to the reliability of the German guarantees. It was absolutely necessary, he wrote, that the Germans somehow bind strong Russian forces in East Prussia. The question of the exact nature of the German commitment in the East was a recurring problem in that winter of 1887/8, one which appears never to have been definitely settled. But Moltke's operations plan for 1888 was, as we have seen, based more firmly than any preceding one on Austrian cooperation—a good sign that he was

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21 Ibid., 130.
22 Glaise-Horstenau, 299.
23 For more detailed accounts of this period, see Glaise-Horstenau, 312-317; Waldersee, Briefwechsel, 144; and Germany: Auswärtiges Amt. Die Grosse Politik der Europäischen Kabinette, 1871-1914, Vol. VI (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1923), pp. 56-81 (Hereafter cited as Grosse Politik).
confident in his ally.

There is no way of knowing how effective Moltke's Eastern strategy would have been in an actual war. His plans reveal not only a careful consideration of Germany's military position, but also an outstanding awareness of political factors affecting the general situation. He had considered it necessary to set limited goals for the allied offensive; his plan went no further than a quick blow at the Russian forces in Poland and the occupation of Congress Poland. A pursuit to the interior of Russia did not interest him. Neither was he concerned with the complete overthrow of the Russian army, unless, of course, this should take place in Poland. Once the initial victory had been won, the course of action was to be decided solely by the pressure of events.

Moltke's successor, Count Waldereee, at first held fast to the concept of seeking a decision against Russia. He did, however, alter certain details. The operations plan of 1888 foresaw a German advance from Ortelsburg-Thorn, with the aim of striking the Russians on the near side of the Narew before their deployment was completed. New intelligence reports, however, convinced Waldereee that the Russians had changed their plans. No longer would they try to bar the Narew line. Instead, they would keep retreating eastward with the aim of offering battle in the Lomza area about M+30. The hope of surprising an unready enemy was gone.

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24 Craig, 276.
25 Foerster, Generalstabs, 44.
26 Ibid., 45.
Faced with this changed situation, Waldersee decided to change the direction of the German offensive. The new area of concentration was to be Ortelsburg-Johannesburg-Lynck; the Narew was to be crossed farther upstream, near Lomza. This change had several important consequences. First of all, it meant the fortresses of Lomza and Osowice would have to be forced before the advance could commence. The new plan also involved a redeployment of forces. An army detachment of 1 corps, 2 reserve divisions, and a cavalry division was to deploy around Soldau as flank guard while 2 armies, each of 3 corps, 2 reserve divisions, and a cavalry division were to execute the Narew offensive. The main difference between Waldersee's and Moltke's plans, however, was that Waldersee intended to mount an offensive against the Niemen as well as the Narew—a separate army was detailed to strike the Russian Niemen Army before it could concentrate. Its primary mission was to cut the railroads from Kovno and Grodno to Vilna. If this could not be done, the army was to turn south and move against the flank of the Russians on the Narew. It was an alteration fraught with grave risk, since the reinforcement of the left had been gained only at the cost of weakening the forces directed against the Narew. It was, however, considered necessary. The changed objectives of the German southern wing would make it possible for the Russian Niemen Army, unless it should itself be attacked first, to sidestep from Vilna through Grodno to support the Narew Army. Considering the changed Russian plan, it seemed the only thing to do if the concept of the Eastern offensive was to be retained in its
entirety.

Waltersee's plan had another serious weakness of which he was well aware. The terrain on the Lomza-Osowiec area was such that in wet weather an offensive was impossible. In one of his memos Waltersee stated:

In the Eastern theater of war...operations hang totally on the weather...Should war start in the wet season, it must be questioned if it would not be better to await their attack.  

This, however, is more than just a sharp criticism of his own offensive plan. It is a foreshadowing of a basic change in the German approach to the problem of a two-front war.

Waltersee retired in 1891, and Alfred Graf von Schlieffen assumed the post of Chief of Staff. He faced the same major problem as his predecessors, that of a two-front war. However, several of its elements had altered greatly in the preceding fifteen years. First and most important, there was Austria. Moltke's Aufmarschplan of 1888 had provided for an Austrian advance into southern Poland, with objectives in the Ivangorod-Lublin region. This movement, combined with the German advance from East Prussia theoretically would confine the Russians in a rough triangle with its apex near Warsaw. Schlieffen, however, had begun to doubt seriously Austria's ability to carry out its part of the offensive. The first memo he issued as Chief of Staff expressed the familiar

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27 Ibid., 45-46.
28 Ibid., 47.
concept of seeking a decision in the East. Schlieffen's reasoning, however, differed sharply from that of his predecessors. If the main German strength were not deployed in the East, he said, there was danger of Austria collapsing completely.

This problem only complicated the main question in Schlieffen's mind. Was it possible to achieve a decision in the East under existing conditions? When Moltke had first considered the problem the Russian army had been scattered in small garrisons all over Russia. Since the Russian railroad net was ridiculously inadequate, it was possible to count on having to face only a part of the Russian army in the first weeks of war. By 1890, however, Schlieffen saw that the situation had changed. Russia had moved many of its corps from garrisons in the interior to the western frontier. To expedite the deployment of the remainder, railroads were being built in European Russia with all possible speed. Russian strategic concepts had also altered. According to the best German information, the latest Russian war plan involved one offensive from the Niemen against the German left and another from Podolia, against the Austrian right flank in souther Galicia. This meant that each ally would have to secure its own respective flank before any combined operations would be undertaken. This in turn meant a tendency to set up two separate theaters of war in the East. Furthermore, the threat from the West was becoming dangerously apparent. Previous German plans had assumed that

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31 Cochenhausen, 258-259.
Germany could take the initiative at will on the Western front. Now the growing French offensive power made it probable that if Germany diverted the mass of her strength to the East, she would have the problem of stopping a French attack which, initially at least, would have overwhelmingly superior forces.

Schlieffen, despite these obvious problems, seems at first to have retained the concept of an Eastern offensive. It was not, however, to be a pincers movement. Instead he postulated a joint German-Austrian offensive from Silesia and Galicia into Southern Poland. This variant had several apparent flaws. First, it left East Prussia completely exposed to a Russian attack. Second, while the combined offensive was to be directed on Ivangorod, the roads and railroads in this area were extremely poor on both sides of the frontier. Finally, perhaps decisively, Schlieffen feared that Austria would not move until the German attack had succeeded. Thus, Germany would have to bear the whole burden of the first actions alone, a risk Schlieffen considered to be excessive in view of the probable results.

This plan was never to become a reality. As time passed, Schlieffen's increasing concentration on the West resulted in a corresponding neglect of the East. His plans and thoughts grew ever more concerned with the absolute necessity of winning a quick victory—a thing he considered impossible to achieve in the East.

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33 Ritter, The Schlieffen Plan, 22.
34 Moriarity, 28.
His later Aufmarschpläne were all based on the aggressive defense of East Prussia until reinforcements could arrive from the West. If the Austrians did attack, they could not count on any appreciable German support during the first few weeks of their offensive. In any case the problem of combined operations would only become important once German strength in the West was freed, and Oatheer could be made strong enough to mount a major offensive.

A detailed discussion of Schlieffen's plan for the defense of East Prussia could easily serve as the topic of a separate study. He never deceived himself either about the time it might take to win a decisive battle in the West or about the danger this meant to East Prussia. In the written critique of his last war game, in 1908, he said:

...as soon as the decision in the West is won, on the same day if possible, the railroads are to move toward the East, to seek on the Vistula, the Niemen, the Narew a new decision...If we must fight a month in France, still we cannot leave the Vistula, the Oder, and the Elbe and still carry on in France...we must seek to throw the Russians back at the start of the war.

East Prussia, with its complex network of lakes, swamps, and woods, was well-adapted to defense by a small force. Its strategic position was good, offering excellent possibilities for surprise tactical offensive blows. But whatever plans were made in this regard, it was above all essential to keep the army intact. To achieve this, Schlieffen was even willing if necessary


36 Foerster, Generalstabs, 51-52.
to retire behind the Vistula. It would be hard, he said, to sacrifice East Prussia, but "it is better to sacrifice a province than an army."  

German military literature of this period often mentions staff rides, war games, and tactical problems in which every conceivable method for the conduct of the war in the East was examined. These included a defense based on the Masurian Lakes and Königsberg, a defense of the Vistula line only—even a major attack to cripple the Russians before the Western offensive began (the so-called Grosse O斯塔ufmarsch). Despite this, however, it must remain clear that Schlieffen's only solution to the overall problem of a two-front war was a major offensive in the West. Even the Grosse Oстаufmarsch, as it developed, remained little more than a theoretical exercise. To Schlieffen, the most important problem was not a major offensive against the Russians, but the conduct of the defense of East Prussia. He knew that the geography of the area and the disposition of the Russian railroad net both encouraged division of the Russian forces into two parts. At the same time, they gave the Germans an excellent chance to prevent the enemy's junction. Schlieffen was certain that the preliminary for any decisive success in the theater would be the concentration of as much strength as possible against one of the armies, and here the zone of the Masurian Lakes was

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37 Ibid., 53.
39 For a detailed treatment of this plan see Foerster, Generalstabs, 54-59.
vital. The widest gap between them was covered by Ft. Boyen; the others could easily be barred with field works and heavy guns. If the Russians advanced simultaneously from the Niemen and the Narew, as seemed most likely, their armies would at some point inevitably be divided by the Lakes. Therefore, for several days at least they would be separate entities. Schlieffen's plan was to throw the entire German strength at whichever army first came within striking distance and crush it. Then the excellent East Prussian railway system would enable the Germans to concentrate against the other. However, no matter what happened in the opening battles, whether it should be victorious or defeated, Ostheer must in no case let itself either be cut off from the Vistula, or so badly crippled that it could not form a continuous front along the river.

Schlieffen also considered the possibility that a surprise Russian blow might cut the railway lines farther east, forcing Ostheer to deploy only on the Vistula. In this case he was prepared to abandon most of East Prussia, leaving only a garrison in Königsberg, and then make a stand on the line of the Vistula. To make this possible, he worked constantly at strengthening the Vistula forts and Königsberg. Even in this case, however, he emphasized the necessity of overwhelming the Russians in de-

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40 Cochenhausen, 275.
tail if such an opportunity should arise.

The development of Germany's war plans had adversely affected her relations with Austria. As far back as April of 1891 Schlieffen had expressed a fear that, far from mounting a separate offensive, the Austrian front would not hold without German aid. Hermann von Kuhl, in fact, states emphatically that the only reason why the offensive from Silesia had been developed in the first place was that "otherwise the Austrians will not attack." The plan implied distrust of Austria's fighting qualities and offensive spirit, and naturally Austria was not consulted while it was in the process of development. Relations between Beck and Schlieffen were not the best in any case. After their first meeting in 1891, Beck called his colleague "taciturn and not very obliging," and this impression was further strengthened by Schlieffen's reluctance either to release or to discuss his operational plans. Von Deines, still the German military attaché in Vienna, did all he could to bring the men closer together, but met with little success.

In August, 1893, Schlieffen surprised Beck completely with his plan for an offensive towards Ivangorod. It was accepted only with reluctance; Beck felt too few provisions had been made to secure the respective flanks of the allies. Then, without warning,

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42 Cochenhausen, 276-278.
Schlieffen informed the Austrians of still another change in plans. In May, 1895, he revealed his decision to deploy the Ostheer again in East Prussia. He would attack over the Narew if possible; Austria, in turn, was to turn the troops on its left flank further north in order to cover Prussian Silesia. From there this force, perhaps reinforced by some German units, would move against the Vistula between Warsaw and Ivangorod. Once beyond the river the Austrians were to act according to the situation, either making contact with their main army advancing from the San or coming to the aid of the Ostheer. Beck was understandably unwilling to take this risk. He did not approve of the plan; Schlieffen seems never to have proposed another. After 1896 the communications between the two General Staffs were as good as destroyed. Each went its own way and developed its own plans, the one for the defense of Prussia, the other for an offensive in Galicia.

The twentieth century saw several exercises illustrating the variations on Schlieffen's plan for the East which have been outlined above. Two can serve as examples. The maneuvers of 1900/01 were based on a retreat behind the Vistula, then a counterattack defeating a Russian attempt to cross the Vistula and Oder. In 1901, still another war game was played under Schlieffen's super-

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vision. The goal of this exercise was to gain more time than could be gained by a defense alone by launching an offensive against Grodno, with the aim of upsetting the Russian concentration. If the railway lines in this area could be cut, the two main Russian deployment areas would be completely cut off from each other. Afterwards the bulk of the 7 corps to be involved in the thrust would move west, leaving Ostheer to deal with the situation in East Prussia. The Russians seem somehow to have learned of this plan, and even though it was never developed beyond the discussion stage, an increased concern for the defense of Grodno is reflected in many subsequent Russian directives.

The problem of allotting forces to the respective theaters of war was also constantly recurring. Even after a decisive victory in the West, the troops could not simply be about-faced and marched to Prussia. The questions of pursuit, of guarding prisoners, of replacing casualties had to be considered. Furthermore, the carrying capacity of the railroads would be involved. This was the responsibility of the Railways Section of the General Staff; by 1903, this bureau was able to guarantee the transport of 11 corps to the East in a short time. This technical achievement had much to do with Schlieffen's decision to leave little more than a token force in the East. From 1901 on, an average of 3 corps, 4 reserve divisions, and 2 to 4 cavalry divisions was

allotted to the Ostheer in the annual Kriegsplan.

Given such a weak instrument, flexible planning and skillful leadership were absolutely necessary if Ostheer was to have any chance of surviving, much less of winning a victory. From 1908 to 1913 its designated commander was Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz. He had commanded the I Corps at Königsberg for five and one-half years prior to his appointment, and was an experienced and imaginative officer—perhaps a bit too imaginative for some of his conservative superiors. His memoirs are full of his ideas, plans, and insights on the problems of the Eastern front. Though some of them may be a bit extreme, they are never dull. However, he was not responsible for the German strategy in the East. After Schlieffen's retirement that task fell to Colonel-General Helmuth von Moltke, nephew of the first Moltke. He made few changes in the form of his predecessor's plans. Like Schlieffen, he rejected the concept of a major offensive in the East, as he believed that as soon as the Germans appeared in strength the Russians would simply move back their deployment areas. He knew that variation "G" of the Russian war plan provided for abandonment of the frontier districts, and that the main concentration in this case was to be made in the fortified area north of the Pripet Marshes.

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52 Cochenhausen, 271-274.
Given this situation, a German offensive promised little chance of a rapid success—the Russians could simply keep withdrawing eastward while building up their own strength. In fact, Moltke had so little confidence in the possibility of an eastern offensive that he even reduced Osteher's proposed order of battle further to 3 corps, 1½ reserve corps, and a cavalry division. This is especially noteworthy, since after 1905 Russia appreciably increased both the speed of its mobilization and the operational readiness of her army. Osteher indeed would face a difficult task if war came; at the same time as its foe was being strengthened, its own strength would be sharply reduced. Even as late as 1912 Moltke considered it possible that Russia might remain neutral in the face of a Franco-Prussian war, but he did not believe this would have any practical effect on the overall situation. Indeed, the necessity for an offensive in the West seemed to him so overriding that in a memo issued in 1913, he finally declared the Grosse Ostaufmarsch to be superficial. In his opinion a German offensive of any size against the swampy bottom lands and fortified crossings of the Narew and the Niemen was folly. Even if the river lines could be forced the Russians would only withdraw into the interior. As for the Austrians, they would have to strike

56 Forster, Generalstabe, 52-53.
directly at the heavily-fortified Ivangorod-Kovel area, and would probably be unable to force the position in time to help the Ostarmee. A combined German-Austrian operation with a single goal was in Moltke's opinion scarcely feasible given the existing conditions.

This view, however, was not shared by the new Austrian Chief of Staff, Conrad von Hützendorff. A man of strong character and unshakeable will, he was determined somehow to secure the greatest possible German commitment to the East. In a memo of April 17, 1908, he first expressed fear of the increasing threat to Austria from Italy and the Balkans, a threat which might mean that Austria would have to turn part of her army to that frontier. On January 1, 1909, at the height of the Bosnian crisis, Conrad visited Berlin, hoping to obtain definite information on existing plans for joint action in case of a Russian attack. What he feared most was the possibility of Russia's waiting until Austria was deeply committed in Serbia, then attacking in overwhelming force. To remove this danger Conrad wished to gain a quick success against Serbia, then turn on Russia. If this were done, he said, Austria could have 30 divisions in Galicia by M+22; 8 or 9 more could arrive from the Balkans in three months. He wanted to know definitely what the German contribution would be in such a case.

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58 Foerster, Schlieffen, 22.
60 Ibid., 633-634.
Moltke's reply, sent on January 21, said that a Russian attack on Austria would certainly be a *casus foederis*. When Russia mobilized so would Germany; if it came to a general war, however, Germany would still have to strike France first. Moltke believed a rapid decision to be possible only in the West; he also believed firmly that such a success would provide the most valuable help to Austria. Russia's mobilization was slow; besides, she would have to deal with the Ostheer as well as with Austria. There was, therefore, every chance that victory could be won in the West even before a major battle would occur in the East. On February 24, Moltke again wrote to Conrad. In this despatch he said that in the case of a two-front war, 13 German divisions would be concentrated east of the Vistula. Russia, Moltke said, would probably try to establish "moral superiority" over the Germans by a series of rapid successes on German territory. To have a chance of victory, they would need at least 19½ divisions and probably more. This meant correspondingly fewer troops could be directed against Austria. Concerning the situation in the West, Moltke believed it possible to achieve a decisive success there within four weeks. German troops could arrive in the East nine or ten days later; however, exactly where they would be sent would depend on the general situation.

On February 25, Conrad again wrote to Moltke. This despatch

51 Reichsarchiv, 5-6.
62 Hützendorff, II, 394-395.
embodies a new concept. If Austria did not deploy against the Balkans, Conrad said she could have 36 divisions available for operations against Russia by M+20. If Rumania co-operated with the Central Powers, enough Russian divisions would be diverted to reduce the strength facing Austria to 27 divisions. The Austrian offensive would then begin with an attack directed between the Bug and the Vistula. The heart of the despatch, however, was Conrad's expressed hope "that a mighty German blow will at the same time strike the Russian Narew Army." Three divisions left at Insterburg, he said, should be enough to check the Niemen Army; the remaining 10 would then be available for the main operation. If Russia should attack when Austria was committed to the Balkans, a German offensive against the Narew would be even more necessary. In this case Austria could assemble only 28 divisions against Russia by M+25, and the safest course for her would be a withdrawal of the deployment areas behind the San and the Dniester. Conrad was so convinced of the value of the offensive that he was willing—-even anxious—to take the risk of concentrating forward of the rivers. This meant, however, that the Germans somehow had to prevent reinforcements from the northern Russian armies from reaching the Russians facing Galicia—otherwise the Austrians might be overrun and destroyed in detail before they could concentrate.

Conrad followed this despatch with another, sent on March 8,

63 Ibid., 397-398.
64 Ibid., 398-399.
emphasizing even more the importance he placed on the Narew offensive. Then on March 19, he received a surprise: Moltke declared himself in complete agreement with his ideas! Why Moltke did this has never been definitely determined. His memoirs are silent on the subject, and as far as it can be ascertained, he told no one the exact truth about it. There are, however, certain probable reasons for his decision. First and foremost, he had to fulfill his previous guarantee to Conrad that the Russians would not be able to draw troops from the front in East Prussia. He still counted on an early Russian attack, but he was determined that it would require a really serious situation to force a diverting of German strength from the West. Moltke certainly remembered the concept of the Grosse Oetaufmarsch, but he also believed this would be impossible to execute until victory in the West was certain. Theory, however, had to be held in abeyance temporarily. The Bosnian Crisis was at its height. At this critical time he felt it his duty to support his ally as best he could, and the Narew offensive seemed the best guarantee he could give. Whether he himself actually thought it possible is uncertain. He had in fact considered such an operation in 1907, though he does not seem to have implemented it. He seems, however, to have been convinced at least temporarily. A month later, in a despatch sent on April 19th, he further expressed agreement with Conrad's theory that a German attack against the Narew would provide the best sup-

65 Reichsarchiv, 5-6.
66 Groener, 101-102.
port for the Austrian offensive, and, if successful, most rapidly resolve the uncertainty of the early days. Such an attack, if made with weak forces, would have to overcome many difficulties. Moltke said, however:

I would not hesitate to make the attack in order to support a simultaneous Austrian offensive. Your Excellency can count on this assent, which is the product of careful reflection. The condition is that the movements of the allies begin simultaneously and be carried through whatever happens. Should enemy action make the execution of the plans of one of the allies impossible, the other must be immediately notified, since the security of the whole hangs completely on mutual co-operation.

If closely examined, this statement does imply that the enemy could interfere with the fulfillment of the promise. Yet it altered neither the commitment itself nor Conrad's reliance on it.

The next major series of staff conferences began on January 24, 1913, as Conrad met with the German Chief of Operations, Count Waldsee, for the purpose of deciding the exact German force to be detailed for the Narew operation. Waldsee said that 13 divisions would deploy along and east of the lower Vistula, with the right flank of the force to be directed on Warsaw. Later on, 4 to 6 reserve divisions would be available to follow the main offensive. On February 13, Moltke himself told Conrad that even if Italy failed to send the promised troops to the West, the

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67 Hützendorf, III, 87-88.
69 Hützendorf, III, 87-88.
strength of Ostheer would remain the same. In fact, it was hoped that even more second-line troops could be sent to the East.
Moltke also confirmed Waldsee's earlier statement of the forces available and the timing of the offensive. However, he also expressed the hope that Austria would be able to turn her whole force against Russia. At all costs he wanted to deploy as much of his own force as possible in the West. In Moltke's opinion:

In dem Austrag des Streites zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich liegt meiner Überzeugung nach das Schwerpoint des ganzen europäischen Krieges, und auch das Schicksal Österreichs wird nicht am Bug, sondern an der Seine endgültig entscheiden werden. 70

Moltke's thinking on this subject seems to have been affected somewhat by Schlieffen's memoir of 1913, a document which put such emphasis on success in the West that almost no active units were to be left in the East. Moltke, however, was not the man to take such a risk at any time under any circumstances. Even had he been, the existing relationship between Germany and Austria would probably have made such a daring maneuver impossible. In fact, while Schlieffen's memorandum foresaw the employing of the Ersatz divisions which were to be formed at the start of the war

70 Ibid., 144-145. "In the outcome of the conflict between Germany and France lies, I am convinced, the crux of the whole European war, and the fate of Austria will finally be determined, not on the Bug, but on the Seine." However, Föster, General-Stabs, 54, attributes this quote to Schlieffen.

71 Reichsarchiv, 12.
on the Western front, Moltke planned to turn some of them Eastwards to cover river crossings and provide garrisons. By the end of 1913, German planners counted on a maximum of 100 battalions, 19 cavalry detachments, and 64 batteries of Ersatz troops alone as being available for the Eastern front. This was a far cry from the token force which Schlieffen had proposed.

On December 20, 1913, Waldersee again met with Conrad. At this meeting the problem of a simultaneous German-Austrian advance against the line Angsöl-Ivangorod was again considered. For this operation, Waldersee said, Germany could assemble 32 battalions, 4 batteries, and 4 to 8 squadrons, half to be deployed in Silesia, half in Posen. This corps, composed entirely of Landwehr and Ersatz formations, would be ready by M+12. Even if it should be unable to advance, it would be responsible for protecting the Oderburg-Cracow railroad and the Kattowitz-Beuthen complex of coal mines. This, however, was only a shadow of the force Schlieffen had once detailed for a similar operation. If such an advance should be made, almost the entire burden would not fall on Austria.

The allies' plans seem to have been finally determined by the

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73 Ritter, Stattskunst, II, 274.


75 Hützendorff, III, 500-501.
series of conferences held in 1913. It was agreed that Austria was to throw the bulk of her army into Galicia as soon as the Russians mobilized. Germany would support this drive in two ways; directly by a secondary advance made from Silesia and indirectly by the attack on the Narew. Direct co-operation of the main armies was not considered; neither was the course of events if a decisive victory should be achieved. Finally, as a united command seemed neither desirable nor necessary for these early operations, this constantly-vexing question was neither considered nor settled. However, despite the new air of close co-operation between the allies, several differences of opinion remained. Conrad had not rejected the possibility of a war in the Balkans. If this happened, it would mean both a serious weakening of the Austrian forces opposing Russia and a corresponding increase in Germany's burden. Moltke, on the other hand, was still concerned mainly with the decisive battle in France. He did not want it jeopardized by a rapid Russian advance, but neither did he want to leave enough troops in the East to give a reasonable guarantee for the security of his rear. Finally, Rumania was becoming another cause for concern. It was increasingly apparent that she would probably remain neutral in case of an Austro-Russian conflict—and this foretold a further weakening of Austria's position.

Moltke was unwilling to send more troops eastward but he nevertheless was certain that, even though a decisive victory was unlikely, Russia had to be attacked as soon as possible. If Con-
rad delayed or limited his advance, Russia would have full freedom of action. She could turn her whole strength on either one of her opponents—and the German front would be by far the weakest. If the Russians crossed the Vistula and moved on Berlin, it would be necessary to withdraw troops from France to meet the threat. Moltke hoped that if he did leave enough troops in the East to carry out the proposed Narew offensive, the Austrians would in turn attack more vigorously and to some extent lessen the pressure on East Prussia. Essentially he does not seem to have had much faith in this offensive. It was necessary at the very least, however, to keep reaffirming his commitment to it, for propaganda reasons if nothing else. Since he was unwilling to divert enough strength to launch a real attack in force, it was even more urgent to keep Austria's spirits high.

The spring of 1914 brought only slight changes in the existing plans. The Central Powers still expected that Austria would have to bear the brunt of the first operations against Russia, although there were two other possibilities. One was a rapid attack on East Prussia. The other was a Russian effort to delay the start of operation until she was fully mobilized, then to advance against both allies at once with overwhelming force. This especially was a thing to dread. The German General Staff in the spring of 1914 estimated that Russia would be able to mobilize 50 active and 13 reserve divisions for the European front as early as M418. And

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Reichsarchiv, 12-14.
when fully mobilized, the Russian army would reach the awesome total of 59 active and 35 reserve divisions, 12 rifle brigades, and 35½ cavalry divisions.

The dangers presented by this vast Russian superiority were obvious to both Chiefs of Staff. Italy's commitment to the Triple Alliance was also a key factor. Without her promised contingent for the Western front, it would be extremely difficult to free any German reinforcements for the East until the French had been completely defeated. On March 13, 1914, Moltke informed Conrad of a conference he had held three days previously with General Zuccari, the designated commander of the Italian Expeditionary Force. He said Zuccari had informed him that during the next year the Italians' arrival could not be counted on before May 22. By that time Moltke hoped to have won a decisive victory in the West; in any case he could not afford to wait. Therefore, he could make no basic changes in the existing Aufmarschplan which would divert more German strength to Oostheer. On May 5, however, Lieutenant Colonel Bierneth, the Austrian Military attaché in Berlin, reported to Conrad a talk he had had with Waldsee on the 4th. Based on this talk Bierneth said that he believed Waldsee favored increasing the German strength in the East. It appeared that opinion on this subject in the German General Staff was somewhat divided. Conrad decided the time was favorable for a conference. Perhaps he would yet be able to get more German troops for his proposed

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77 Ibid., 16-17.
78 Hützendorff, III, 609-611.
79 Ibid., 667-668.
offensive.

On May 12, Conrad went to Carlsbad, where Moltke was taking the waters. According to his memoirs he arrived at 6:16 P.M., went at once to Moltke, and had a private conference with him which lasted until 8 P.M. His is the only firsthand account; there were no witnesses and Moltke's memoirs are silent on the subject. Conrad opened the discussion by asserting that, although he could no longer count on Rumania's assistance, he still intended to attack in Galicia. He emphasized once more the urgent need for more German troops in the East, since he considered it highly probable that the main Russian attack would be directed against East Prussia. In this case, he said, it would be to Germany's own advantage to be strong on the Eastern front. He asked what would happen if Austria were defeated, or if Germany failed to win an overwhelming victory in the West and found herself faced with a Russian invasion which Ostheer should be unable to parry. Moltke simply answered that the Vistula fortresses would have to delay them long enough to enable reinforcements to arrive. Finally, the question of Italian aid was raised. Moltke said that Pollio, the Italian Chief of Staff, had recently offered to put several corps at Austria's disposal. In reply Conrad asked why Moltke himself did not take these Italians. It would ease the transportation difficulties, and, more important, it would enable the German V and VI corps to remain in the East. According to Conrad Moltke simply refused, offering no explanations.

There was nothing more to be said. Just before Conrad left

80 Ibid., 669-672.
for Vienna, he asked Moltke once more how long it would be, in case of a two-front war, before German reinforcements could arrive in the East. Moltke's reply is significant: "We hope to be ready to turn our main strength against Russia six weeks after the beginning of operations." In 1909 he had definitely set the time for this transfer at M+30; now it was to be M+60! Similar treatment had been given the proposed Narew offensive. The German General Staff was expecting an initial Russian attack on the area east of the Vistula. At all costs the river line had to be held and Ostheer had to be kept intact. To achieve this even Schlieffen had been willing to sacrifice East Prussia up to the Vistula. The southern offensive which Austria wanted simply could not be executed with the 12 or 13 divisions which would be available. To drive with weak forces against the Narew while leaving only a token force covering East Prussia against a thrust from the Niemen seemed unjustifiably reckless. The Narew offensive might be still in effect as far as Austria was concerned, or even in the mind of Moltke, but it seems that no other responsible German officer considered it possible.

This assertion is borne out by events. On August 1, 1914, Germany mobilized. There were no striking changes in the prewar plans: the bulk of Germany's army was directed to the Western front. Moltke's memoirs tell of his reactions when the Kaiser, reacting to Lichnowsky's telegram, told him "We must, therefore, simply march on with the whole army to the East." The Chief of Staff was

81 Ibid., 673.
82 Reichsarchiv, 41-42.
horrified. The mobilization plan was too complex; once issued it could not be altered. If the Kaiser insisted on this change, Moltke said, it would not be an army which would arrive in the East—it would be an unarmed and hungry mob. The vacillating William changed his mind; the deployment proceeded as scheduled.

The outbreak of war brought still another exchange of correspondence between Moltke and Conrad. Conrad considered the German Narew offensive even more vital, for Austria was no deeply involved with Serbia. On August 3 he informed Moltke that his offensive would begin as scheduled, towards the east on the 20th and toward the north on the 22nd. To support this he desired an offensive of 4½ corps to be launched "in the direction of Siedlce" as soon as possible. Moltke's reply, sent on August 5, simply re-emphasized the necessity for gaining a decisive victory in the West. His despatch says nothing whatever about an offensive toward the Narew. It only expresses hopes for victory, vague theories about starting a Polish insurrection, and vaguer rumors about the Russian movement. The two Chiefs of Staff were not to be in direct contact again until the 18th, and then it was only a letter to Conrad in which Moltke emphatically refused to send any reinforcements to the East. Osterheer would fight with what it had.

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84 Hützendorff, IV, 322.
85 Ibid., 194-195.
86 Ibid., 203.
CHAPTER II
PRELIMINARY OPERATIONS, AUGUST 1-17

East Prussian topography reveals a maze of irregular hills covered with wild and uncultivated areas of barren, sandy soil alternating with an intricate network of swamps, lakes and forests. "To any but those who know it, the region is a wilderness of monotonously similar topographical forms." The lakes, swamps, and forests restrict troop movements and make the area ideally adaptable for defense. Strategically it is a "labyrinth of defiles," which can be divided into four zones. The first of these is the Königsberg region, extending from Labiau to Tapiau and including most of the peninsula. The Deime River, barely fordable and with few bridges, provides a natural line of defense for this area. Along the line Tapiau-Pillau small fieldworks had been established just before the war, but Königsberg was the key point in this area. Impregnable to anything short of heavy artillery, it could easily be reinforced by sea, and if properly defended it would form a serious threat to the flank of any force attempting to bypass it.

Next comes the forty-three-mile Insterburg Gap, extending from Tapiau to Angerburg. Here the country is open, dotted with large farms and small villages. The field of view is quite good, the terrain usually suitable for the movement of all arms. Never-

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3 For this division and the discussion of it in succeeding paragraphs, see Ironside, 12-17.
theless there are several forest areas which offer a serious obstacle to the movement of large forces. Probably the most important terrain feature in the Gap is the Angerapp River. It is fordable, but the west bank commands the east, providing an excellent defensive position. It could easily be occupied and strengthened, and had been carefully reconnoitered by the Germans before the war.

Then comes the fifty-mile zone of the Masurian Lakes, extending from Angerburg to the Russian frontier south of Johannesburg. This area too had been well prepared for defense by the Germans. The only suitable road between the Lakes was barred by Ft. Boyen. This fort might be technically obsolete, but an attempt to capture it without heavy artillery would probably involve heavy casualties. The glacis was completely exposed and could not easily be stormed in the face of machine-gun fire. Taken as a whole, then, the Seenkette presented an almost impregnable front which could be held by only a few troops. Furthermore, it offered an excellent screen for operations undertaken either to the north or to the south of it.

The fourth zone extended from Johannesburg to Soldau, a distance of seventy-five miles east and west. The roads were good here, but the country was rugged and densely wooded. Between the lines Willenberg-Neidenburg and Allenstein-Osterode the terrain was especially favorable to the defense. Long sunken lakes with their axis extending north-south were everywhere; they made lateral communications for a force advancing north difficult or impossible.

Roads and railroads in East Prussia were excellent. Both systems had been laid out to fulfill several aims. They were pri-
arily intended to facilitate defense, to provide rapid communication from the interior, and to insure the rapid movement of troops and supplies to any point in the theater. When needed they performed their functions well.

On August 1, the German 8th Army was mobilized in Posen. Its commander, who had been designated since the start of the 1914 "mobilization year," was Colonel-General Max von Prittwitz und Gaffron. He had previously been Generalinspektor of the 1st Army Inspection in the Danube area and was well-regarded by the Kaiser. Hoffmann refers to him as "a clever, though somewhat harsh, superior." However, Walter Elze, in *The Battle of Gumbinnen*, says of Prittwitz:

He had been favored in his peacetime service, was impressive in appearance, conscious to the highest degree of his self-importance, and at the same time was ruthless, even coarse and self-indulgent. Moltke considered Prittwitz unqualified for this assignment, but his previous efforts to relieve him of command prior to the beginning of operations were all frustrated.\(^5\)

Moltke's memoirs are silent on the subject. If Elze's charges are true, however, it might help to explain the choice of the 8th Army's Chief of Staff—Major General Waldersee. He had held the post of Quartermaster-General before the war, and was considered one of the best officers on the General Staff. However, having recently undergone a serious operation, he "was not in

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5 Quoted in McEntee, 96-97.
full possession of his physical and spiritual strength" at the start of the campaign. Of the lesser staff officers, two are especially noteworthy: Grünert, the Quartermaster, and Max Hoffmann, the First General Staff Officer (G.S.O.I.). Both were to play major roles in the coming operations.

Prittwitz' orders were, basically, to secure East Prussia. At first the army was to be widely deployed. Only when the general outline of the Russian advance was determined should Prittwitz concentrate his force and commence operations. If at all possible the 8th Army was to support the Austrian offensive in accordance with pre-war plans. According to OHL's last directive to Prittwitz, however, this could best be accomplished by 8th Army drawing on itself as much Russian strength as possible. If Russia remained inactive in the north perhaps the proposed Narew offensive would be possible, but in any case Prittwitz was to take no chances. If Russia should turn especially strong forces against the 8th Army, he was even given authority to retire behind the Vistula. This would be a disaster, but it was preferable to the risk of

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8 This position has no exact counterpart in the United States Army. It is concerned with "operations" and in a sense combines the duties of G-2 and G-3. It is, however, a more responsible position than its functions would indicate, and an energetic and able GSOI can have an incalculable influence on his superiors.

9 Throughout this paper these initials will be used when referring to Oberste Heeresleitung, the High Command. The phrase "Army Command" will be used to designate the principal command and staff officers of 8th Army—those who had a hand in making its decisions.
having his army destroyed or driven into Königsberg.

These instructions placed Prittwitz in an awkward position. His primary mission was to hold East Prussia, but his orders also emphasized the need for close co-operation with Austria. No matter what he did, he was almost sure to be outnumbered. German intelligence reports stated that the initial Russian invasion was most likely to come from the direction of the Niemen. If he concentrated far enough to the east to meet this threat, his southern flank was left exposed. If, on the other hand, he concentrated to the south in preparation for a blow at the Narew, his other flank and his rear were wide open. And finally the very flexibility of his orders—especially the clause concerning the abandoning of East Prussia—provided serious dangers for a weak or pessimistic character. OHL was certainly confident enough. Shortly before the start of the war, Prittwitz had been in Berlin to receive final verbal instructions on his assignment. At this conference Moltke again emphasized that the army must not be cut off from the Vistula. He did not, however, believe the situation would become that serious. He expected, rather, that superior leadership, spirit, and tactics would enable the 8th Army to keep the Russians at bay for a long time. In fact, he was convinced that the 8th Army should by no means conduct merely a passive defense. "When the Russians come," he wrote to Waldensee, "not defense only, but offensive, offensive, offensive." Whether the

10 Reichsarchiv, 43-45.
11 Ironside, 56.
12 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 21.
13 Reichsarchiv, 45.
commander on the spot shared this aggressive spirit remained to be seen.

When fully mobilized, the 8th Army consisted of 9 active and reserve divisions, all drawn from the corps districts east of the Vistula. It was hoped that some of the Ersatz divisions would be assigned to the Eastern front. Moreover, as long as the East Prussian forts remained unthreatened, some reinforcements could be drawn from them as well. Königsberg, Thorn and Posen each had approximately a division; Graudenz and Breslau had a mixed brigade apiece. Still these garrisons, though strong in heavy artillery, lacked almost everything else. Kitchens, communications equipment, trains, medical services, even adequate maps were not part of their normal equipment. The field army itself was improperly equipped in some areas, especially in regard to medical services and communications equipment. It could spare nothing for the garrison troops.

Prittwitz and his Chief of Staff found themselves faced with a problem. Both were well aware of Schlieffen's views on the defense of East Prussia. They were aware, too, that Moltke wanted an aggressive defense. But on the other hand, there remained the emphatic orders to maintain contact with the Vistula. How could these seemingly opposed concepts best be reconciled? Waldersee's directive of August 6th outlined three major tasks for the 8th Army:

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14 Ibid., 46-47.
15 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 20-21.
(1) To gain time until a decisive victory in France made reinforcements possible.

(2) Through offensive action to prevent the Russians from turning troops against Austria.

(3) To preserve the Vistula as a base for future operations. ¹⁶

The army's task was essentially defensive, but if it remained static and awaited attack, it would be lost. Just when and where the army could concentrate was not clear at the time this directive was issued. Even considering this, however, it reflects a hint of indecision. Frittwitz and Waldersee had not given up hope of protecting East Prussia. They were willing to carry out their orders—but this document seems to express a certain doubt as to the possibility of the assignment.

Hoffmann gives a good account of the views prevailing at headquarters at this time. According to him there was no fear of a Russian cavalry invasion. On the contrary, the Germans were hoping for one. They were sure they could crush this; the first real danger would be the advance from Vilna and Warsaw. The Germans believed the Russian mobilization would be completed by the 15th; an advance could therefore be expected between the 15th and the 20th. Once the Russians had entered Prussia, the Masurian Lakes were sure to divide their armies. The obvious solution, then, was to strike first one, then the other. According to Hoffmann, it was relatively certain that the Vilna Army would be the first on the scene, for the Russians from Warsaw would be

¹⁶ Reichsarchiv, 48-49.
¹⁷ Ibid., 49.
advancing over much worse terrain. In any case, two things were essential. Whichever army was attacked first, it must be defeated—not merely checked. Second, the Germans must be able to disengage and meet the other one in time. To fail in either could lead to annihilation.

Eighth Army's concentration took place without much Russian interference. Although skirmishes had been occurring all along the frontier since August, none of them involved large forces. The expected Russian cavalry raids did not materialize either; Golovine credits the German plans for internal security with making them impossible. Still, no one at Army Headquarters knew what the enemy was doing. Air reconnaissance was unable to provide much information on the Russian movements. The reports from secret agents rapidly declined in number and value as Russian security measures tightened. The uncertainty at the 8th Army Headquarters was increasing day by day.

Meanwhile the Russian offensive was taking shape. Though according to Danilov it was made chiefly to fulfill a "moral obligation" to the French by relieving the pressure on the Western Front, the plans for it had existed long before the war. Its basic goal was a double envelopment: the 1st Army advancing to the

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18 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 25-26.
19 For a more detailed account, see Rudolph van Wehrt, Tannenberg (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 1934), pp. 40-45.
21 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 23-24.
north of the Lakes, and the 2nd to the south and the west. The
Russian High Command counted on a two to one superiority in num-
bers. They knew the II, V, and VI Corps had moved to the West,
and they believed only the 3 East Prussian corps were left to
face them. The exact timing of the advance, however, was a
problem. On August 10, the High Command, increasingly concerned
with the situation in France, decided that the advance into East
Prussia should commence by M+14. This seemed reasonable enough.
Jilinski, the commander of the Northwest Front, had said in 1913
that the first advance could begin by M+15. But in this case
theory was negated by fact. The Russian mobilization and concen-
tration had been much slower than expected. On the 12th, Jilinski
asked for a postponement, saying that the 1st Army could not begin
its advance before M+19 and the 2nd would be delayed even longer.
His appeal was denied. Regardless of conditions at the front, the
High Command was determined to begin the movement as close to
schedule as possible. This ended the chance of a simultaneous ad-
Vance of both armies. The 1st could easily cross on M+14, but
when the distances the various corps had to cover to reach the
frontier were considered, it was plain that the 2nd Army could not
cross the border until M+17 or 18. For the 1st Army to wait
for them might be preferable, but the High Command ruled it im-

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22 Yuri Danilov, Russland im Weltkrieg, Trans. by Rudolf
23 Ibid., 195.
24 Golovine, 1914, 93-95.
25 Danilov, 194.
possible. The first Russian advance would be from the Niemen.

The Germans were also becoming increasingly certain of this. As early as August 9, Waldemar reported to OHL that the checks administered to the Russian cavalry on the southern frontier, combined with the damage done to the railroads and bridges in this area, made an initial advance from the Narew unlikely. He expected the first Russian advance to come from the line Suwalki-Wirballen. The 8th Army, therefore, would assume position along the Angerapp River to the north of Angerburg. He planned to concentrate the greatest possible strength against the 1st Army, while at the same time securing the 8th Army's right flank and lines of communication against a sudden blow from the south. Prittwitz and Waldemar could dispose of the equivalent of 13 divisions, including Landwehr units and detachments from Königsberg and the Vistula fortresses. Nine of them, along with 1 cavalry division, could be concentrated to face the advance from the Niemen. This concept, however, had several definite weaknesses. The blow against the 1st Army could not be struck too far to the east—the cautious German leadership, with its excessive concern for communications, forbade this. There was always the possibility of a surprise Russian attack from the south, which would completely disrupt the operation against the 1st Army. These difficulties meant that the battle in the north had to be decisive. By waiting for the 1st Army to approach within striking distance, the Germans were allowing them to come that much closer to the Vistula. If the 1st Army was only checked, it would be difficult or impossible to concentrate against the Russian offensive from the Narew without in turn exposing the Ger-
man bases to attack by the 1st Army.

On the 14th, Prittwitz issued his final orders for the concentration against the 1st Army. The XX Corps, reinforced by garrison and Landwehr troops, would cover the right flank. One Landwehr brigade was detailed to screen the Masurian Lakes. Every other man was ordered to concentrate along the Angerapp. Even though the plan reflected an intense concern for security, it was still a gamble in the face of immensely superior strength. In his diary entry for the 13th, Hoffmann referred to the responsibility as "gigantic, and more of a strain on the nerves than I suspected." Miscalculation or defeat could mean the loss of East Prussia.

Besides the Russians, Prittwitz faced another problem—the commander of his I Corps, General von François, had been in charge of the Königsberg Korpsbezirk since September, 1913, and in that time had developed very definite opinions on the defense of East Prussia. He considered the security of his corps district his major task, and had never agreed with the concept of a withdrawal to the Vistula. He wanted to strike across the border as soon as the mobilization of the I Corps was completed, hoping to disrupt the Russian concentrations. If this could be done, he considered it highly probably that the Russians would have to deploy farther back behind the Niemen. This delay would give the Germans more time to gain a decision in the West and reinforce the

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26 Reichsarchiv, 53-55.
the Eastern Front. Even after he was overruled, he constantly urged Prittwitz to strike the enemy with the united strength of the 8th Army as soon as he crossed the frontier. In any event he had no success, for on August 7 he was ordered to remain on the Angerapp line, leaving the screening of the area east of the river to the cavalry. The same day he sent a memo to Prittwitz strongly protesting the abandoning of East Prussia. He emphasized that a chance existed for a real success against the assembling Russians if only the 8th Army would attack immediately. Nevertheless, Army Headquarters took no action on the memo. They saw, if François did not, that such aggressive tactics would certainly mean the I Corps would lose contact with the rest of the army. The maneuver might even mean the entire army would be drawn into a battle on the "wrong" side of the Masurian Lakes and have to fight far to the east—the last thing that Prittwitz wanted.

François remained unconvinced. To fight on the Angerapp, or even at Gumbinnen-Insterburg, meant the surrender of too much German territory. He doubted that Prittwitz ever would attack, even from the Angerapp position. The mobilization of the I Corps was completed by the 13th; in addition François had the 1st Cavalry Division and the 2nd Landwehr Brigade under his command. At first the corps had begun concentrating around Gumbinnen and Insterburg as ordered. However, as the advance parties of the

29 Ibid., 156-157.
30 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 24-25.
I Reserve Corps began moving into position along the Angerapp, François saw no reason why he should not push his troops forward. Instead of following orders and remaining on the Angerapp, he began moving units forward surreptitiously. Thus, by the 13th, most of the I Corps had reached the line Goldap-Stallupönen.

Prittwitz, of course, remained completely unaware of the changed situation. As far as he was concerned, the corps was safely in position on the Angerapp. He was far more worried about the developing Russian offensive. A combination of daily reconnaissance reports, messages from agents, and information gleaned from Russian prisoners had convinced him that the Schwerpunkt of the Russian offensive would be directed to the south of the Rominten Forest. This belief had been expressed--somewhat uncertainly--in his orders of the 14th. It seemed to be definitely confirmed on the same day, when the Russian 1st Army advanced from Suwalki on a front of twenty-five miles. That evening Waldersee informed Moltke that it was almost certain that "strong Russian forces" were concentrating from south of Augustow to the Rominten Forest. The general impression at 8th Army Headquarters was that a massive thrust was developing against the line of the lakes.

On the 14th, Conrad telegraphed to Prittwitz requesting once more an offensive on Siedlice. He followed this on the 15th with letters to both Moltke and Prittwitz, emphasizing further the

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31 Reichsarchiv, 56-57.
32 Ibid., 59.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 60-61.
need for an offensive to relieve the pressure on the Austrians in
35 Galicia. He received his answer on the 15th from his own liaison
officer with the 8th Army, Captain Fleischmann. The telegram
said that "a decisive blow" was about to be struck against the
Russian Niemen Army. Within a few days this thrust should suc-
ceed, but only afterwards could an offensive southward be contem-
plated. Thus expired the final remnant of the grand plan for
a concentric offensive into Poland—the Germans by this time had
far more immediate concerns than the fulfilling of a prewar com-
mittment, however definite it might have been.

However, by the morning of the 15th it was clear that the
Russians had not crossed the Goldap-Marggrabowa line in force.
Throughout the 15th and 16th a series of conflicting reports came
in from the front-line units. It was difficult to reach any de-
finite conclusions at headquarters. Finally, it was decided,
however, though the Russian advance had not yet begun, its right
flank was definitely south of the Wirballen-Kowno road. This
meant that the 1st Army, with 5½ corps and 4 cavalry divisions,
was exactly opposite the I Corps on the German left, perhaps even
overlapping it. The 8th Army might be in danger of being out-
flanked from the north. It would be necessary to extend François'
left to guard against this—if the reports were true. But up to
the evening of the 16th it was still not certain just how far
north the Russian flank extended. Besides, the prospect of a
major Russian attack south of the Rominten was still in view at

35 Hützendorff, IV, 388-389.
36 Ibid., 389-390.
Army Headquarters. Prittwitz, therefore, decided not to commit himself until the situation should develop further.

Eighth Army Headquarters was in for yet another rude surprise. Through reports which had arrived on the 15th, it had learned that at least some units of the I Corps were east of Gumbinnen. Prittwitz did not interfere with this. On the 15th, however, he repeated his orders for the I Corps to concentrate at Gumbinnen. Only detachments were to be left at Goldap, Stallupönen, and Tollmingkehmen. But his instructions were far outdated. Actually the I Corps stood with a brigade each at Goldap and Tollmingkehmen and a division at Stallupönen. The Corps Headquarters, it is true, remained at Insterburg, but François deliberately avoided that city, remaining with his forward units almost constantly. His Chief of Staff, Colonel Schmidt von Schmidtseck, was put in an extremely awkward position by the actions of his superior. Under the German system of command it was his duty to keep Walderssee informed of the movements of the I Corps. Of course the last thing François wanted was to have Army Command learn of his unauthorized advance. Therefore, he usually left his Chief of Staff at headquarters, seldom informing him of the orders he issued. Relations between the men were naturally becoming increasingly strained by the 17th. The Army orders of the 14th had made it very clear that Prittwitz intended to fight somewhere on the Angerapp. François, however, refused

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37 Reichsarchiv, 59-63.
38 Ibid., 70.
39 François, 167.
40 Reichsarchiv, 69-70.
to retire. He planned to await attack where he stood, hoping the rest of the army would have to concentrate in line with the I Corps. He was supremely confident in the ability of his troops to defeat superior Russian forces—or at least to resist until reinforced.

François did have a certain justification for his actions. The Moltke tradition emphasized the importance of allowing subordinates a maximum amount of liberty within the limits of a mission—and to François, his mission was the defense of East Prussia. Anything else was secondary. He had made his preparations well. All roads were watched by motor patrols; the forward detachments, though under a definite schedule to withdraw, were themselves given freedom to undertake local offensives if the opportunity offered. The corps was holding a front of sixty kilometers from Kowahlen to Bilderweitschen. Five battalions were at Goldap, with advanced posts at Kowahlen and Gurnen. Six battalions were at Tollmingkehmen, 9 at Stallupönen. The heavy artillery was in reserve at Gumbinnen. All was in readiness for the arrival of

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François, 133-134.


Ironside, 79.

On August 13th the I Corps was disposed as follows: In reserve at Gumbinnen: 3rd Grenadiers, 52nd Field Artillery, heavy howitzer battalion. Goldap: 4th Grenadiers, 44th Infantry (-I Bn.), Staff, 1st and 2nd Batteries, 37th Field Artillery, 3rd Pioneer Co. Forward Posts: Kowahlen: Machine Gun Co., 4th Grenadiers, 10th Jägers zu Pferde (-2 squadrons). Gurnen: I/44th Infantry, 3rd Battery, 37th Field Artillery, 1st Squadron, 10th Jägers zu Pferde.
the enemy.

On the morning of the 17th François was inspecting his advanced posts at Bilderweitschen, when he received a report of a Russian advance to the south of the town. He immediately went to the headquarters of the 1st Division in Stallupönen; its commander, von Conta, reported the Russians were advancing against him on a broad front from Dopönen to Bilderweitschen. The nearest German troops within supporting distance were at Tollmingkehmen; François at once ordered them to turn and advance on Göritten in order to flank the Russians. He also ordered up the heavy howitzers from Gumbinnen. This was all he could do at the moment; he then went up to the tower of the church at Stalluponen to follow the course of the battle.

The 1st Division's position was becoming increasingly serious. The Russian corps had not all started at the same time, and until noon reinforcements kept entering the battle on both flanks. Rennenkampf was hoping to encircle the Germans; he came close to succeeding. On the right, around Dopönen, 2 battalions of the 3rd Grenadiers and an Abteilung of the 52nd Field Artillery were able to stop the enemy's advance by noon. The left of the 2nd Brigade was so hard-pressed, however, it had to be reinforced from the north. This in turn opened a five-kilometer gap on both sides.

Tollmingkehmen: 33rd Fusiliers, 45th Infantry, 1st Field Artillery, 4th Squadron, 10th Jagers zu Pferde, 2nd Pioneer Co.
Stallupönen: 1st Grenadiers, 41st and 43rd Infantry, 3rd Uhians, 16th Field Artillery, 1st Pioneer Co.

François, 170.
Reichsarchiv, 73-75.
of the railroad around Bilderweitschen. Luckily the Russians failed to exploit this gap, and 2 companies of the II/41st Infantry were able to maintain themselves here until late afternoon. This gave the brigade a chance to form a new line northeast of Stallupönen. Nevertheless, the threat from the north was becoming increasingly serious as the Russian right flank kept extending itself. Around noon the corps heavy artillery arrived from Gumbinnen; François immediately ordered it into position to support Conra's hard pressed division. There were still no signs of any reinforcements coming from either the south or the west.

But François did get something from his army commander. That morning Prittwitz had telephoned Insterburg to request specific information on the position of the I Corps. For the first time he discovered that François had posted not merely a vanguard, but the bulk of his corps, far forward of his assigned position. The I Corps was, in fact, standing almost alone, forty kilometers in front of the Angerapp. The I Reserve Corps had not even reached its assigned positions along the river; if I Corps became heavily engaged there was no possible way to support it. The horrified Prittwitz immediately ordered François to retire at once on Gumbinnen, avoiding battle if possible. To insure that this order was delivered, an officer was to be sent forward by auto from Insterburg. According to François, the man found him in the bell tower at Stallupönen and shouted, "the Commanding General orders

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47 Reichsarchiv, 73-75.
48 François, 170.
49 Reichsarchiv, 73.
you to break off the battle at once and retire on Gumbinnen." François replied, "tell General von Prittwitz that General von François will break off the battle when the Russians are beaten." Whether or not François really expressed himself so dramatically matters little, for he could have made no other decision under the circumstances. The German counterattack from the south was expected momentarily, and in any case an attempt to disengage the 1st Division in the face of superior Russian forces would be foolish. Therefore, François' G.S.O.I., Major von Massow, informed Prittwitz that his orders were impossible to execute, since the I Corps was already committed to battle. This message, which reached Army Headquarters about 2 P.M., was the first of any kind Prittwitz had had from François in several days. To say that he was shocked by it is an understatement, but there was absolutely nothing he could do at the moment.

But if Army Command could do nothing, help was on the way from the south. Von Falk, commanding the brigade at Tollmingkehen, first heard the sound of gunfire early in the morning. Without waiting for orders he decided at once to join the battle to the north. Two battalions and a battery were left in position at Mehlkemen with orders to hold the Russians there at all costs. The rest of Falk's brigade, the 33rd Fusiliers, the II/45th Infantry, and 5 batteries of the 1st Field Artillery, began marching north at 11:30 P.M. By 4 P.M. Falk had reached Matternischken; he im-

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50 François, 170.
51 Reichsarchiv, 74.
mediately deployed there and attacked toward Göttingen. The attack
struck the rear of the Russian 27th Division; simultaneously the
3rd Grenadiers and the right flank of the 43rd Infantry attacked
the Russians frontally. The combined pressure was too much to
withstand. The 105th Infantry was annihilated. Over 3000 pri-
soners were taken, and the division simply dissolved. Falk's
attack decided the battle. The Russians fell back rapidly all
along the line; by nightfall the pursuing German infantry had
reached the line Skarullen–Pöttschlaufen.

Stallupönen was a brilliant local success. François had
fought 3 divisions (the 25th and 27th of the III Corps and the
29th of the XX) to a standstill with only 3 brigades. The Rus-
sians had been overwhelmed by their faster-thinking, faster-moving
opponents; a quick decision, a rapid march, and a sudden attack
from an unexpected quarter had completely routed them. Von Falk
had taken a calculated risk to redress a dangerous situation. His
confidence, both in the mobility of his troops and the ability of
a weak detachment to delay the Russians, was perfectly justified
by events. The Germans had not only extricated themselves from an
extremely perilous situation, but by nightfall they were the mas-
ters of the field both materially and morally.

A renewal of the attack the next day promised almost certain
success—but only for the immediate area. Strong Russian forces
were advancing north and south of the battlefield. The 30th Di-

\[\text{52} \]

\text{Infantry in Battle} (Richmond: Garrett & Massie, 1939),

\[\text{53} \]
P. 97.

\[\text{54} \]
Ironside, 78–81.

\[\text{54} \]
Reichsarchiv, 74–75.
vision was threatening the weak outpost at Goldap, and during the afternoon a brigade of the 40th had pressed hard on the detachment at Mehlkemen. With this information, conscious too of Frittwitz' direct orders, François decided to retreat. The Russians did not interfere with the withdrawal, but François stepped into an unpleasant situation when he arrived at his headquarters. He found awaiting him a sharp demand for an explanation of his reasons for disobeying a direct order by advancing and engaging the enemy. François immediately telephoned Army Headquarters. In his opinion, he said, his actions had been more than justified by results. With understandable exaggeration he informed his chief that "two enemy corps" had been decisively defeated and forced back over the frontier. More important to Frittwitz, however, was the definite information Stallupönen gave about the overall enemy deployment. Now he could be sure that the Russians were not planning to attack south of the Rominenten Forest. On the contrary, the strong forces used at Stallupönen revealed that the main blow could almost certainly be expected north of the forest. Besides, relieving an experienced corps commander just before a major battle was risky. He decided, therefore, to overlook François' disobedience and leave him in command.

Stallupönen was a success which could as easily have been a disaster. Had the Russians been only a little more skillful in handling their superior forces, or had the Germans made any serious mistakes in their conduct of the battle, the I Corps could have

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François, 173-175.
been annihilated. In any even the Germans gained confidence in their superiority over the Russians which they were never to lose. Of more immediate value was the definite knowledge of the axis of the Russian advance which they acquired. But these gains were only won by taking tremendous risks. It is hard to justify François' actions in this phase of the operations. Having at best an inadequate knowledge of the overall situation, he nevertheless attempted to force the adoption of his own plan on Prittwitz. His contempt for the enemy, though justified by events, is not a good spirit with which to begin operations against superior numbers. The fact that he escaped disaster—and even won a striking little victory—cannot conceal the danger of the premises underlying his offensive. It can be readily admitted that his military ability was superior to that of Prittwitz. It is possible, too, to justify his concept of attacking the Russians as far to the East as possible. But deliberately jeopardizing a full corps to prove a point is quite another matter. Had Prittwitz been made of sterner stuff François would at the least have received a stiff reprimand; perhaps he even would have been relieved. As it was, he escaped unscathed, justified by events and firmly convinced that he alone was able to conduct the campaign in East Prussia. His enhanced self-esteem was to play a major role in the subsequent development of events.
CHAPTER III
GUMBINNEN AND ITS AFTERMATH

See Maps 3 and 4

The commander of the Russian III Corps planned to resume the attack on Stallupönen on the 18th. To this effect he had ordered the 40th, 25th, and 27th Divisions to attack the line Kassowen-Goritten-Stallupönen at 4 A.M. During the night, however, patrols discovered the Germans were gone. (By this time the I Corps had reached the area of Einzuhen-Kerrin, about ten kilometers west of the battlefield). The Russians made no further attempt to pursue till late on the 18th, and even then it was sporadic and without definite direction. This is understandable, as the Army Orders for the 19th and 20th were only received by the corps in the early hours of the 19th. These orders still reflected the basic concept of a deep envelopment of the German left flank in order to cut it off from Königsberg. Five infantry divisions and 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) cavalry divisions were to advance north of the Rominten Forest, reaching the Angerapp by the evening of the 19th. Rennenkampf correctly assumed that the Germans would concentrate along the Angerapp. He therefore wanted to deploy his main body obliquely in relation to the river, hoping to outflank the 8th Army. During the course of the 19th, the Russians generally reached their assigned objectives with no serious opposition. Nevertheless, their right-flank division, the 28th, was checked around Niebudussen by the advance guard of the I Corps and driven back to the line

1 Reichsarchiv, 78.
2 Ironside, 85-86.
3 Golovine, 1914, 114-115.
Ussballen-Brakupfenn. The Russian corps commander was firmly convinced that these Germans were just a rear guard, that the enemy was withdrawing. He therefore made no effort to maintain contact with the enemy during the night. This was only partly due to his own lack of initiative. Rennenkampf had ordered a general halt for the 20th. In some respects this was almost imperative, for the Russians had been advancing constantly for six days. Their first march had been forced; all the rest had been accompanied by fighting. Moreover, the order had an unforeseen result—the corps commanders obeyed it with such alacrity that contact with the enemy was lost all along the front. This oversight was to furnish the Russians with a surprise the next day.

The concentration of the rest of the 8th Army had, on the whole, gone according to Prittwitz' orders of the 14th, though some units of the XVII Corps did not reach the Angerapp until the evening of the 18th. Now the situation which had inspired the orders no longer existed. Prittwitz had thought the enemy's right reached only to the Rominten Forest, and he had planned to strike this flank obliquely from Gumbinnen-Insterburg. Now he knew that the Russian flank actually reached above Schirwindt. Furthermore, he had believed the Russians had begun advancing in force as early as the 14th. Instead, they had only begun on the 17th, and even this delayed advance had been checked by François. Prittwitz was beginning to wonder if it would be possible to fight a decisive battle against the 1st Army before the 2nd Army's advance would

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4 Ironside, 86-87.
5 Golovine, 1914, 114-115.
make it necessary to turn south. Russian slowness and German im-
petuosity had combined to create increasing uncertainty at Army
6 Headquarters.

Frittwitz at first had feared an immediate Russian pursuit of the I Corps. To support François on the evening of the 17th, he ordered the army to be ready for an attack as soon as the XVII Corps should be completely assembled. On learning that the Russians were not following François closely, he changed his orders again. 7 Now he intended to await the Russians behind the Angerapp. He then ordered the I Corps at 6:40 P.M. on the 17th to remain on the line Gumbinnen-Niebudssen until further notice. The 2nd Landwehr Brigade and the 1st Cavalry Division were to remain under François' command. 8 Why he left this corps in such an isolated position is not clear. Perhaps he simply disliked giving François another order to retreat. 9 It is more probable, however, that Frittwitz still underestimated the northward extension of the Russian right flank and believed they would have to strike the line of the Anger-
app. The position was strongly held by the XVII Corps, the I Reserve Corps and the independent 3rd Reserve Division; an attack here would probably be repulsed. François would then be able to strike their right flank and rear. 10 But just in case the Rus-

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6 Reichsarchiv, 79-81.
7 Ibid., 81.
8 François, 179.
9 Reichsarchiv, 81.
10 Ironside, 92.
sians should attempt to outflank François from the north, Frittwitz allowed the corps commander to withdraw his southern division, the 2nd, and station it behind his own left flank. To fill the gap in his line, François was assigned on the evening of the 18th the Hauptreserve of Königsberg, about equivalent to a division.

By the afternoon of the 19th alarming reports began coming in from the south: the Russian Narew Army had finally begun its advance. A quick victory over the 1st Army was now more urgent than ever—but the German wireless interceptors had by this time picked up Rennenkampf's orders for a general halt on the 20th. What was to be done? Could the Germans awaits the Russians along the Angerapp, or was it necessary to face the issue in the north by advancing to the attack while at the same time sacrificing the advantage of a prepared position? Frittwitz hesitated.

Once again François made the army commander's decision for him. During the morning of the 19th, the planned changes in the I Corps' position were accomplished with no enemy interference. The 1st Division prepared to meet a flank attack from the direction of Mallwischken; the 2nd was moving into position behind it. As a further security measure the 2nd Landwehr Brigade was moved from Kraupischken to Mallwischken, to strike in turn the flank and rear of the expected Russian attack. Through the morning of the 19th, reports of a gradual Russian advance kept arriving at Corps Headquarters on the Mallwischken Road. According to these the enemy seemed to be advancing in force between Schanken and Einzuhmen. François became increasingly convinced that the main attack would

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11 Reichsarchiv, 81.
come from the north, and it would be directed, not on the Angerapp, but on Gumbinnen. He telephoned Prittwitz around noon to inform him that he expected such an attack would take place either that evening or early on the 20th. Reconnaissance showed that the Russians were advancing carelessly. François was sure that an attack delivered before their deployment could begin would have an excellent chance of success. He wanted to strike the enemy's flank around Kattenau with his 2nd Division, and he begged Prittwitz to order the XVII Corps and the I Reserve Corps to advance to his support. Prittwitz temporized—he said that he could only decide when he had a better view of the situation south of the Rominten Forest.

By the evening of the 19th, that view was rapidly taking shape. In the south, the 2nd Army had reached the area Lomzha-Ostrolenka; its advance guards were advancing on Ortelsburg. In the area immediately south of the Rominten Forest no enemy was visible. But air reconnaissance reported that from 1½ to 2 divisions were advancing from the south and east towards Darkehnmen. This, combined with François' earlier report, convinced Prittwitz that his subordinate had been right—the Russians were really advancing in force on Gumbinnen. The I Corps could not be left unsupported again.

At 5 P.M. Prittwitz informed François that the XVII Corps would support him by attacking the next day. François said that "this joyful message took a weight from my soul." He summoned his division commanders immediately and began issuing orders for his own

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12 François, 180.
13 Reichsarchiv, 83.
14 François, 181-182.
attack.

Once again François' determination had overcome the caution of his superior. This time he had received assistance from the Russian advance in the south. Prittwitz saw that if he waited much longer the 2nd Army might be in his rear before he could even attack the 1st, much less destroy it. His general plan was to let François open the battle by attacking the Russians at Gumbinnen. The XVII Corps was then to advance in two columns against the line Walterkehmen-Perkallen-Flicken, thereby threatening the left and rear of the Russians facing François. Prittwitz believed that the XVII Corps alone was strong enough to force a decision here; the rest of the 8th Army would merely have to cover the flank of this corps. This was to be accomplished by the I Reserve Corps attacking the Russians advancing from Goldap. The 3rd Reserve Division was to advance no farther than Kutten, screening in turn the I Reserve Corps.

Once more the stage was set for François. During the afternoon of the 19th, several skirmishes had occurred along his front. The 2nd Landwehr Brigade had been attacked by the Russian Cavalry Corps and forced back to Insterburg. The German 1st Cavalry Division, coming to the aid of the Landwehr, in turn drove the Russians eastward and out of the battle area, ending the possibility of a threat from that quarter. Later that afternoon the Russian 28th Division attacked the front of the 1st Division, gaining nothing and suffering 600 casualties. These skirmishes only served to

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15 Reichsarchiv, 83-84.
16 Ibid., 181-182.
confirm François' plans for the next day. The 2nd Division was to move out at 9 P.M. and advance through Esseringken and Rohrfeid toward Sassupönen. The division then would deploy there, with its front echeloned to the left facing Mallwischken, and at 4 A.M. attack in the direction of Mingstimmen. The artillery of the 1st Division was to open fire in support of this advance at 3:20 sharp; the division itself was to attack along its entire front from Pakallnischken to Springen as soon as the 2nd Division's movement was well underway. Brodrück's Division (the Königsberg Reserve) was to remain in position on an eleven-kilometer line from Augustuponen to Springen. The 1st Cavalry Division and the corps cavalry were to follow the 2nd Division, to cover its flank and to attack if opportunity offered.  

The 2nd Division began its advance on schedule. Shortly afterwards, however, von Falk received a report that the Russians had attacked the 1st Division, driving back the 3rd Grenadiers, and were already in Schmilgen. Unable to either confirm or deny the report, Falk decided to turn his division to meet the supposed threat. According to the best available information, a meaningless and causeless panic had occurred about 7 P.M. in some of the wagon lines of the 1st Division. It was soon checked, but its influence spread through the entire division and gave rise to the false report given to Falk. Once assured that the Russian breakthrough was imaginary, Falk telephoned François to ask if the planned advance was still possible in view of the time the division had lost.

17 François, 182.
18 Golovine, 1914, 123.
The reply was simply a further order to move immediately. Falk knew better than to argue. By 10 P.M. he was able to report that his division would be in position to attack by the assigned time.

Falk had ensured secrecy for his fifteen-kilometer march by leaving detachments behind to keep his bivouac fires burning; his deployment was further screened by a heavy fog. The attack did not begin until 4:30 P.M., but despite the brief delay it caught the Russians completely by surprise. Mallwischken fell to the first charge of the 33rd Fusiliers, and the artillery of both German divisions found some excellent targets in the enemy bivouac areas. The Russians were able to make a stand for awhile on the Ederkehmen Heights, but only until the German guns were brought forward. At 9:30 the position was stormed from the west and north; the Russians fled eastward in disorder.

The 1st Division had begun its supporting barrage at 3:30 A.M. The Russian artillery at first replied vigorously, but its fire died down as the pressure from the 2nd Division on the flank increased. At 5:30, von Conta decided to attack. He intended at first to move straight ahead in the general direction of Kussen, but this direction did not fit into François' general plan. He ordered Conta to attack toward Kattenau instead. Thus, the entire division had to swing its front almost ninety degrees while heavily engaged with the enemy. It also involved some delay, but by 11 A.M. the Division had captured Brakupönen, and by 12:30 P.M. the whole Russian

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19 François, 183.
20 Reichsarchiv, 86-87.
21 Ibid., 87.
line had retreated east of Tulschen-Kalbassen. Its heavy casualties included over 5,000 prisoners. François had originally intended Brodrič's division to remain in position, thereby providing the base of a trap which, he hoped, would be closed on one side by the I Corps and on the other by the XVII Corps. Besides, it was composed of untried Ersatz and reserve units, untrained in open warfare and with little transport or artillery. It was unlikely that it could attack with any success. But when he contacted Brodrič's headquarters about 9 A.M. he found the division had assumed the offensive—largely due to the urgings of the corps liaison officer, Lt. Col. Kormann. The division, however, did not get far before Russian artillery drove it back to its old position with heavy casualties. There was still a chance for the trap to close.

In the meantime, the Russians had been counterattacking heavily in the north. The Germans were driven out of Brakupőnen; some of the infantry units were becoming increasingly unsteady. Then several batteries of the 1st Artillery Brigade were ordered to "take up a new position" to the rear. The 2nd Division's artillery, thinking this movement was a Russian advance, fired on them. This touched off a brief panic. The infantry of the 1st Division fell back beyond Niebudassen; the southern flank of the 2nd also began to retreat. In any case, the officers were soon able to restore order; by 2:30 the advance was under way once more. By

22 Ibid., 87-88.
23 François, 185.
3 P.M. the Germans reached and cut Gumbinnen-Kussen Road, but the exhausted men could do no more that day. There was no sign of the XVII Corps from the south; the I Corps had no reserves left to exploit its success. At 4 P.M. François reluctantly gave the order to halt for the day.

And what of the XVII Corps' attack? The corps commander, General von Mackensen, had received his orders at 4:40 P.M. on the 19th, and his corps began its advance at 5:30. However, to reach the assigned line of departure, on and west of the Rominte River, a twenty-five-kilometer night march was necessary. Administrative arrangements were generally bad. Nothing seems to have been done to clear the road of the masses of fugitives; several times the advancing units had to be diverted to side roads. Intelligence was not of the best either. All Mackensen knew at first was that the Russians were advancing against the I Corps, and that their left stood at Augustopūnen and Grūnweiitschen. At 8 P.M., a telephone message from the I Corps informed him that only weak Russian forces, a division at the most, were south of the Stallupūnen road. However, a second report, send around 10:20, contained the information that the Brodruč Division was expecting an attack during the night, and that 3 Russian divisions were in position along the line Augustopūnen-Walterkehmen, behind the Rominte Creek. At 11 P.M., the I Corps reported that the enemy was advancing in "several columns" south of the Pissa and had occupied Walterkehmen. Mackensen, however, was sure that this advance was directed against

25 Reichsarchiv, 88.
26 Ironside, 99.
the I Corps; the troops at Grünweitschen and Walterkehmen were only a flank guard. He decided, therefore, to base his decision on the first report from the I Corps and attack northeast toward Grünweitschen. He was acting on his own responsibility; until 1 A.M. no orders came from Army Headquarters to coordinate the movements of the corps.

At 4 A.M. on the 20th, Mackensen and his staff established the corps command post on the heights northeast of Girnen. Despite the earlier reports that Walterkehmen and the Rominte crossings were held in strength, the area visible to the staff appeared completely free from the enemy. Mackensen was convinced he had achieved a favorable position unobserved; there seemed to be no reason whatever to delay the attack. The noise of battle from the I Corps' front was increasingly audible as he issued his final orders. The 35th Division was to attack Todszähnen; the 36th would take Walterkehmen and secure the southern flank of the corps. At 4:15, a message from Army Headquarters finally reached Mackensen. It informed him that the regiment he had left at Darkehmen had been ordered to reinforce him, and that the I Reserve Corps would be ready to advance on Goldap from the area south of Darkehmen at 4 A.M. This despatch only confirmed his decision to attack.

The assault units of the corps jumped off at 4:30. Admittedly, the men were tired. An officer of the 5th Grenadiers wrote later: "we had been marching all night and had but one hour's rest....

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28 Reichsarchiv, 90.
29 Foerster, Mackensen, 37-38.
the march discipline was not of the best." 30 Still, at first the advance went well. The 35th Division met little opposition; by 9 A.M. its forward elements, the 87th Brigade, had reached the area just north of Todszühnen. And there the brigade commander received a visitor. At 8:30 A.M. François, confident of success, had sent a liaison officer south with a message for Mackensen. It said that the I Corps had been advancing since dawn, and it promised a great victory if the XVII Corps would only advance toward Szirgupőnen and take the enemy in the rear. 31 Curiously, François' memoirs make no mention of this despatch. It is certain, however, that it existed. Moreover, it had a definite effect on the operations in the center. Its tone was vehement enough to convince the brigade commander to comply with François' request. On his own responsibility he shifted his axis of assault to the north, towards the Pissa. 32 Mackensen did not approve of this—"it caused an excessive and unwarranted extension of his line. But by the time he learned of it the movement was well under way and could not easily be recalled. 33

Meanwhile, the 36th Division had not been faring too well. Almost as soon as it advanced, it encountered resistance. At 7:35 A.M. its commander reported optimistically that the division would be able to "block the retreat" of the Russians falling back on Trakehmen. At the time he was unaware that previously he had been facing only advance guards. Two entire divisions, the 27th and

30 Ibid., 38.
31 Reichsarchiv, 90.
32 Ibid., 90.
33 Foerster, Mackensen, 39.
40th, were awaiting him on a line extending from north of Mallisch-kehmen to just south of Sodehnen. This area, with its numerous hills and small woods, offered poor observation at best, and the Germans had not even attempted to reconnoiter it before advancing. Mackensen, however, was firmly convinced that the enemy was in full retreat, and only around Sodehnen, just east of the Schwentischke, was any real resistance left. He ordered the 129th Infantry, which had just arrived from Darkehmen, to advance on the right of the 36th Division in the direction of Enzuhnen and strike the Russians on the flank. This regiment ran into unexpectedly strong Russian resistance even before it got across the Schwentischke; it was unable to execute its assignment. By this time, both the 35th Division and the rest of the 36th had also encountered the prepared positions on the Schwentischke Heights. The attack made hardly any progress the rest of the morning.

Around noon, Mackensen finally became aware that his plan was based on a faulty estimate of the situation. By 1 P.M., his advance had come to a halt all along the line. The infantry had outrun their supporting artillery; they were lying in the open under heavy Russian fire, unable either to advance or dig in. Mackensen was determined to carry his offensive through despite the changed circumstances. In the early afternoon the German infantry launched a series of unsupported attacks on the Russian positions,

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34 Reichsarchiv, 90-91.
35 Foerster, Mackensen, 39.
36 Reichsarchiv, 92.
37 Foerster, Mackensen, 39.
but they were repulsed every time with increasingly heavy casualties. In front of Grünweitschen 2 batteries, the 2/36th and the 1/81st, deployed in the open in a courageous attempt to support their infantry. Within a few minutes the batteries had suffered over 150 casualties—virtual annihilation for no result. The survivors were forced to retire, abandoning their guns. The last German attack was made at 2:30. By this time many of the infantrymen had been without sleep for almost twenty-four hours. Ammunition was running low. The Russian artillery and machine-guns were too well sheltered to be neutralized by German counterbattery fire. Casualties mounted, especially among officers and noncommissioned officers. About 3 P.M. the first units began falling back from the east of Grünweitschen. The surviving officers were able to check them for a time; Mackensen himself left his command post to help. Nevertheless the panic began spreading along the line. Even before this Mackensen had reached the conclusion that his corps was not strong enough to press the attack unsupported. By that time, however, it was too late even to maintain the position. The hard-hammered 35th Division had had enough; the 36th followed them to the rear. By 5 P.M., despite the herculean efforts of Mackensen and his staff, the whole corps was in full flight. Most of the 87th Brigade had even recrossed the Romintel! Mackensen himself said that "the men were in great part out of the control of the surviving officers." In the open country between

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38 Ehrenbuch, 251-252.
39 Reichsarchiv, 92.
40 Ibid.
the Schwentischke and the Rominte there seemed little chance of organizing a successful resistance. At 5 P.M., therefore, he ordered a general retreat behind the Rominte to the line Perkallen-Kulligkehmen.

Mackensen admitted in his memoirs that he was "badly shaken" by the panic of his troops. Had he not underestimated their power of resistance and overestimated the ability of the Russians to pursue, he would probably not have been so quick to retreat so far. In retrospect it is difficult to see what else he could have done. His corps had been badly mauled by an enemy force of unknown strength. He had no reserves left. On his right, the I Reserve Corps was heavily engaged; the Brodrück Division was also incapable of supporting him. It was better to retreat than run the risk of annihilation. In the last analysis he had nothing to blame except his own impetuosity. He attacked under a complete misapprehension of the situation, without attempting any kind of reconnaissance to verify his hasty conclusions. Furthermore, he kept pressing his attack long after his mistake should have been apparent. Certainly his men cannot be blamed. All ranks of the infantry and artillery had done their utmost; casualties totalled over 8,000, including 200 officers. Temporarily at least, the XVII Corps was finished as a fighting unit. The corps was later to demonstrate by long marches and hard fighting that its spirit had not been permanently broken by its defeat, but it was a badly shaken body of men that finally settled down for the night, ex-

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41 Foerster, Mackensen, 40-41.
42 Ibid., 41.
hausted and disheartened.

Farther to the south, the I Reserve Corps had been somewhat surprised by the order to advance. It had spent most of the 19th working on the Angerapp positions, the men were tired, and the corps commander had expected to await attack where he was. But a long night march brought the corps into position on the right of the XVII Corps by 8 A.M. on the 20th. Its original assignment had been to protect Mackensen’s flank against an attack from attack from Goldap by itself attacking the Russians there. While the corps was advancing, its orders were changed. Instead of attacking, Below, the corps commander, was now merely to observe the Russians until he could be reinforced. However, he disagreed with this order. At 7:30 A.M., he instructed his division commanders to turn northeast, intending either to join Mackensen’s battle or to attack the Russians from Goldap. His decision brought an emphatic order from Prittwitz to reoccupy the positions at Klessowen and Königsfelde. Air reconnaissance had just brought the news that 2 Russian corps were advancing south of Goldap, and the I Reserve Corps was badly needed there. By 10:30, the Corps was back in its old position—just in time to meet the Russian advance. The 1st Reserve Division was attacked on the flank and driven back almost to Gawaiten. Then the Germans rallied, counterattacked, and in turn drove the Russians back for a mile. Meanwhile, the 36th Reserve Division had attacked Gawaiten and pressed on through the village, driving the Russians before them. By evening, the I Reserve Corps stood in two completely separate groups, one south
of Klessowen and the other east of Gawaiten. But if the corps was somewhat scattered, it had still won a complete victory in its sector; both officers and men had done very well under trying circumstances. This little action, often overlooked, stands as a real tribute to the excellence of both the German reservists and their commanders. No Russians left their front to support the attack on Mackensen that day. Had the corps failed to hold the Russians, it is more than possible that they would have been able to strike northwest from Goldap against Mackensen's rear. And if this had happened, most probably the whole of the XVII Corps would have been either destroyed or scattered. The I Reserve Corps had accomplished its mission.

The 3rd Reserve Division, on the extreme right of the army, was not ordered to advance until 4:30 P.M., and did not reach its position south of Klessowen until nightfall. It took no part in the day's fighting.

Throughout the day Army Command had been kept relatively well-informed of the changing situation. The atmosphere of victory created by the early successes of François and Mackensen evaporated rapidly during the afternoon. The I Corps was not advancing; air reconnaissance reported masses of Russian cavalry to the north of the main armies. In the center, it became increasingly doubtful if the XVII Corps would be able to continue its attack the next day. In fact, the black picture of the state of the troops which

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43 Reichsarchiv, 93-96.
army liaison officers presented even made it questionable if the corps would be able to maintain its position. The I Reserve Corps and the 3rd Reserve Division were also heavily outnumbered. A rapid success against Rennenkampf seemed increasingly unlikely, not to say impossible. By late afternoon Prittwitz was wondering if it might not be necessary to order a general retreat.  

At 5 P.M., François received a call from Army Headquarters. It was Prittwitz asking for a report. He told François that a retreat was a necessity; François replied by requesting permission to attack! He said that the Russians in his sector were defeated; he could easily roll them up from the north and ease the pressure on Mackensen. His corps had inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy and had taken 6,000 prisoners. Success was certain if only one more attack could be made. Prittwitz answered that he wanted to "think through the situation." Then he hung up. 

And he had more to concern him than just the situation on his immediate front. At 2:30 that afternoon he had had a telephone conversation with Colonel Hell, the Chief of Staff of the XX Corps. Hell said that the Russians were advancing in force; their strength totaled between 2 and 2½ corps on the immediate front of his Corps alone. The XX Corps was not expecting any reinforcements, but headquarters was confident it could hold out alone. In fact, Scholtz even proposed to delay the Russians by attacking their right wing from Neidenburg. About 7 P.M., however, a report came in from von Unger at Soldau that "at least a corps" had advanced to ten kilometers south of Mlawa. This information

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45 Reichsarchiv, 96-97.
46 François, 186-189.
47 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 247.
destroyed all previous calculations. It was clear to Prittwitz that the 2nd Army was not only advancing in force, but that it was extended much further west than had been expected. Any still-lingering thoughts of the offensive against Siedlizie had to be discarded once and for all. Now even the Vistula bases were in question. In view of the wide sweep of the enemy advance, it was entirely possible that the entire 8th Army might be cut off and driven either into Königsberg or against the coast. Prittwitz and Waldersee therefore decided it was necessary to break off the action at Gumbinnen and retreat immediately.

The situation at 8th Army Headquarters on the evening of the 49th is an interesting study in the psychology of command. Prittwitz had begun the operations of the 20th in a high state of optimism, which had been further built up by the early reports of François and Mackensen. By nightfall, however, his confidence had evaporated completely. According to Max Hoffmann, he and Grünert were standing in front of Army Headquarters in Nordenburg at 6:30 P.M. discussing the prospects for the next day, when a messenger arrived from von Scholtz with the report that "4 or 5" Russian Corps were crossing the frontier at Soldau-Orteisburg. When Hoffmann heard this he said:

I am afraid the nerves of the Commander in Chief... are not strong enough to receive this message. I would be best pleased if we could suppress it. Tomorrow we would end the battle here and turn on our Warsaw opponent.

48 Reichsarchiv, 97-98.
49 The official history says nothing whatever about this entire episode.
The astonished Grünert replied, "surely you would not keep such important information from the Chief." Hoffmann says in his memoirs that he spoke in jest --but if he thought he could have succeeded in his deception, it is not altogether improbable that he would have tried it.

In any case he was not to have the opportunity. Prittwitz, after reading the despatch, called Grünert and Hoffmann into his office and informed them that he had decided to retire behind the Vistula. Grünert tried at first to change his mind. He urged a continuation of the attack against Rennenkampf, saying that it would take at the most two or three days to defeat him and turn on the other Russian army. Until then, he said, Scholtz should certainly be able to maintain himself. Prittwitz cut him off, saying angrily that the army was to retreat at once. He and his Chief of Staff were responsible for the decision--not the Quartermaster or the G.S.O.I.

Much has subsequently been said about Prittwitz' decision. Certainly there were powerful arguments in favor of continuing the attack against Rennenkampf. Schlieffen had always emphasized that the only way to defend East Prussia was to take advantage of the division of their forces caused by the Masurian Lakes and to strike and destroy whichever enemy first came within reach. Max Hoffmann, thinking in this tradition, was also of the firm opin-

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50 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 28.
51 Ibid., 28-29.
ion that the battle should be fought out. Even though the XVII Corps had been defeated, the troops on both flanks were fresh and confident. To attempt a withdrawal in the face of a numerically superior enemy might well be suicide. Besides, even if the 2nd Army were able to advance further toward the Vistula while the battle against Rennenkampf was in progress, they would have to guard themselves even more against a German attack from the north. Even the official history admits that, had Hoffmann’s advice been followed, "it can be said with complete security that on the 21st of August a victory would have been won." However, this bolder plan was overborne by the army commander’s desire to escape the Russian pincers. Prittwitz believed a victory in the north no longer possible; in view of the threat posed by the 2nd Army he could see no solution except a general retreat.

Actually, his position was not nearly as bad as he thought. In the south, the XX Corps was established in a strong natural defensive position. Its commander was confident he could hold. In the north, the entire position from Brodredijk’s right flank to the extreme left of the line was intact. Even if the men were tired, the recuperative power of good troops is great—and the I Corps was a first-class unit. On the right, neither the I Reserve Corps nor the 3rd Reserve Division had as yet been heavily engaged. As for the XVII Corps, Mackensen’s gloomy reports could be discounted at least partially, since he had been so closely involved in the

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52 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 244-245.
53 Reichsarchiv, 98.
panic. Had Prittwitz been aware of the Russian situation he would have had even greater reason for optimism. In the north, the 28th Division was in full retreat, with over 7,000 casualties. The Cavalry Corps had not moved from Kraupischken for almost twenty-four hours. There were no reserves left behind the front. In short, it seems hard to disagree with the official history's assertion that 'nothing could have stopped the rolling-up of the Russian line from the north' by François' victorious corps.

The Russian center had also suffered heavily in the fighting on the 20th. The 27th Division alone had lost over 6,600 men since the 17th; the 40th Division's commander reported heavy straggling in his division. The 3 Russian divisions in this sector would have probably held against any attack the shaken XVII Corps could mount on the front. However, they could have easily been rolled up by an attack on either flank. As for a Russian attack in this sector, this was, in the opinion of the commanders on the spot, impossible. Casualties had been too heavy; units were too badly mixed up. All of the Russian reserves available in the south had been committed against Below; their morale also seems to have been badly shaken by the events of the day. The German 3rd Reserve Division was by this time on the ground, fresh and eager. Had it moved forward the next day, its attack might well have trapped the better part of 2 divisions in the area between Lake

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54 Ironside, 107.
55 Reichsarchiv, 100.
56 Golovine, 1914, 137-138.
Goldap and the Goldap River. Unfortunately, Prittwitz' actions relegated this entire prospect to the realm of a might-have-been theoretical victory.

But if Prittwitz had decided to retreat, exactly what orders did he issue to implement this? At 9 P.M., von Mackensen telephoned Army Headquarters from Plickien. He was just beginning his report when Prittwitz interrupted him. According to Mackensen, the army commander said that because of the threat from the south he was retiring across the Vistula. Mackensen, with the I Reserve Corps and the 1st Cavalry Division under his command, was to retreat on foot, moving through Allenstein toward Elbing. Von François had a similar experience. He had issued at 9 P.M. his orders for continuing the attack the next morning, and he was preparing to move his headquarters when he got a phone call from Army Headquarters ordering the artillery and trains of Brüder's division back to Königsberg. François was told to expect a longer telegram explaining in detail the changed situation. About 11:30 P.M. this message arrived. Its burden was that, because of the threat from the south, the army was retreating. François, of course, was outraged. He devotes several pages of his memoirs to a castigation of Prittwitz' courage and competence. But more important, nowhere does he say, or imply, that the despatch ordered a general retreat behind the Vistula. According to his account, Prittwitz simply ordered a withdrawal, assigning no

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57 Reichsarchiv, 100.
58 Foerster, Mackensen, 41-42.
definite direction to it.

Which of the corps commanders is correct? The only first-hand account of that evening at 8th Army Headquarters is Hoffmann's. According to this, Frittwitz left the office after shouting that he was responsible for the decision to retreat. Von Waldsee then asked Hoffmann to issue the appropriate orders. However, if the official history is correct, Waldsee himself was not convinced that such a withdrawal was the proper maneuver. In any case, he did not want to embody a retreat to the Vistula in either the orders to the corps or the despatch to OHL. Hoffmann immediately took advantage of this. He and Grünert were not able to convince Waldsee to continue the attack in the north. They did, however, encourage him to support a movement against the 2nd Army rather than a general retreat. When Frittwitz returned to the office, Hoffmann met him by asking just how the proposed retreat was to be conducted—in Hoffmann's opinion it would be physically impossible. He and Grünert thereupon showed Frittwitz by compasses on a map that the left of the 2nd Army actually stood nearer to the Vistula than did the 8th Army. If the Germans retreated, there was every chance they would be cut off before they reached the river. Whatever Frittwitz decided to do, the 2nd Army's advance would have to be stopped. Considering the existing road and railroad networks, Hoffmann said, the easiest way to do this was by concentrating against the Russian left flank. Frittwitz

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59 François, 189-192.
60 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 249.
61 Reichsarchiv, 102.
was somehow finally convinced. He still believed it necessary to break off the battle at Gumbinnen, but at least he abandoned his first resolve to retreat behind the Vistula. The 8th Army would concentrate against the Russians advancing in the south.

According to Hoffmann the "fundamental instructions for the Battle of Tannenberg" were issued that night. Army Order No. 8, sent at 9:30 P.M., ordered the I Corps to withdraw from its position by rail and road along the line Gosslershausen-Strasburg-Bischofswerder-Freistath. Simultaneously the 3rd Reserve Division was to move to Deutsch-Eylau. Both formations were to support the XX Corps. The XVII Corps and the I Reserve Corps were to withdraw on foot and screen this movement. The only "movement behind the Vistula" would be that of the I Corps—and Hoffmann says this was done only for technical reasons. Page 103 of the official history gives the date of these orders as the 21st, but Hoffmann's diaries, written in his own handwriting, would seem to prove this absolutely false. Prittwitz almost certainly did not have a Tannenberg in view, but at least he seems to have recovered his spirit enough by midnight on the 20th to agree to these orders.

Prittwitz had not only talked to his corps commanders on the night of the 20th—he had also been in touch with OHL. Just when these conversations occurred is not certain. Mackensen and Fran-

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62 The account of this episode has been reconstructed from Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 29-30, and Tannenberg, 249.
63 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 249-250.
64 Ibid.
Both seem to have talked to the army commander around 9 P.M. According to the official account, OHL put through a call to East Prussia around 9:30 P.M. on the 21st. Perhaps this is simply a mistake in dating; in any case it seems certain that Frittwitz also talked to OHL around 9:30 on the 20th. This is borne out both by the tone of the conversation and the sequence of events. At noon on the 20th, according to the official history, 8th Army reported that it was engaged in a "promising" battle at Gumbinnen. Throughout the afternoon further reports of a complete victory had been relayed from Königsberg. It was therefore a real shock when OHL, calling again to ascertain the situation, learned from Frittwitz that strong Russian forces were advancing in the south. He could not guarantee that he could maintain his position; he was planning to retreat toward West Prussia. Again, no mention whatever was made of a retreat to the Vistula. Perhaps the best explanation of this confusing situation is advanced by Hoffmann. He says that during the time when Frittwitz was out of the office he called his corps commanders and either called or was called by OHL. In his momentary agitation he informed everyone that he going behind the Vistula. He forgot, however, to tell any of his staff—and when he changed his mind he forgot to inform OHL of the fact. This, however, is still not quite satisfactory. Neither the accounts of OHL or François say anything about a retreat to the Vistula, and there is no reason why either should have lied to protect

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66 Reichsarchiv, 103.
67 Ibid., 103-104.
68 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 250-251.
Prittwitz. Perhaps the best possible reconstruction is that Prittwitz left the office definitely convinced it was necessary to withdraw across the Vistula—he may even have called Mackensen first and told him this. For some reason, however, he only informed François and OHL that he was going to retreat. Perhaps he simply thought better of his original hasty decision by the time he called them. The state of the telephone communications, too, may have had something to do with it. Both Prittwitz and his listeners were tired and under great strain. Perhaps, as Emil Ludwig suggests, Prittwitz was simply misinterpreted by the other officers. It is certain in any case that he did approve the orders for a concentration against the 2nd Army. To that extent at least, he seems to have recovered his nerve rather quickly.

But misinterpreted or not, the news from East Prussia had a shattering effect at OHL. General Ritter von Wenninger, the Bavarian military plenipotentiary, has described the gloomy depression which settled over all the officers—especially Moltke—as they learned of it. Early on the 21st OHL again contacted Prittwitz. The 8th Army's commander remained convinced that the offensive against Rennenkampf was impossible. He outlined instead a new plan. The I Reserve Corps was to hold the line of the Angerapp; the XVII Corps, extended as far to the north as possible, was to observe the enemy, retiring behind the Vistula if necessary. The I Corps was to go by rail to Graudenz. This message,

70 Goerlitz, Hindenburg, 55.
however, only upset Moltke further. He became convinced that not only was the army in full retreat to the Vistula, but that Frittwitz was foolishly planning to divide his forces in the face of a superior enemy. OHL could readily see how this could be interpreted as one of those "grave situations" in which the 8th Army was authorized to withdraw to the Vistula. Such a withdrawal would only be feasible, however, if strong reinforcements could be sent east to cover the retreat and hold the Vistula line. On the 21st, at least, OHL had no troops immediately available. Besides, even if it were successful, a retreat from East Prussia would enable the Russians to turn overwhelming strength against the developing Austrian offensive in Galicia. Somehow, then, the 8th Army had to be halted east of the Vistula.

In the course of the 21st, a more realistic appraisal of the situation in East Prussia developed at OHL. This was due largely to the efforts of several young officers in Operations Section—Bauer, Geyer, Wever, and von Harbow. They took upon themselves the task of contacting the various corps by phone, a difficult job in view of the uncertain communications. The results, however, were worth the effort. The opinion seemed unanimous that the situation was serious, but none of the corps commanders felt themselves defeated or considered the outlook hopeless.

The picture in the East was also changing. Early on the 21st Army Headquarters moved to Bartenstein. All of the morning re-

71 Reichsarchiv, 104-105.
72 Max Bauer, Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat (Tübingen: Osianders'che Buchhandlung, 1921), p. 48.
ports were optimistic. The Russians were making no effort to drive back François in the north. Scholtz reported that he had drawn his corps farther west during the night in order to attack the Russians from Mlawa. As late as 8 A.M., however, the enemy in this area had not moved. In view of the Russian inactivity on all fronts, the previous plans for the movement of the I Corps and the 3rd Reserve Division were confirmed by Army Headquarters. The railroads could support no more than this at first. By the 26th, however, Frittwitz hoped to have about 7 divisions ready to attack the Russian left. He hoped that this riposte would enable him to maintain himself either until the XVII Corps and the I Corps could come to his support or until he was reinforced from the West. Königsberg would have to hold by itself—only the Brodrück Division and the 2nd Landwehr Brigade could be spared to reinforce the garrison.

By midafternoon, the situation appeared even more favorable. The left wing of the 2nd Army did not advance at all. The 1st Army did not move until late in the day, and then only with weak van-
guards. The 8th Army was well on its way to gaining a day's march on the enemy. OHL was still anxious, however. That afternoon Walderssee received a call from von Stein, the Quartermaster General. Stein urged an attack on the right flank of the 2nd Army, just west of the Lakes. Walderssee believed that this was still too close to the 1st Army. Instead, he said, it was intended to

73 Reichsarchiv, 103.
74 It will be remembered that von Scholtz had also intended a similar operation, but had to abandon it in the face of superior numbers. See text above, p. 73.
unite the army in West Prussia and from there direct it against the 2nd Army's left. Stein was not too enthusiastic about the idea, but he let it pass for the time. Then, later that afternoon, Prittwitz talked to Moltke once more. He pictured the situation in extremely dark terms; why, no one knows. Perhaps it was to give emphasis to his request for reinforcements. Perhaps, too, his confidence had simply evaporated again. He seems to have been fairly convincing this time; at least Moltke finally said, "if you must retreat, hold the Vistula at all costs." Prittwitz, however, even temporized at this. He asked how he could hold the Vistula with his "handful of men" when the river was so low and could easily be forded. The disgusted Moltke broke off the conversation. This sealed Prittwitz' fate. The general opinion at OHL was that the proposed offensive against the left flank of the 2nd Army was unworkable. No plans for any other attack seemed to exist. In contrast, Army Headquarters had already withdrawn to Muhlhausen; the Etappen-Inspektion was back in Konitz. Whatever Prittwitz said, it appeared certain that he planned to retreat behind the Vistula. In the opinion of OHL, his usefulness was at an end.

75 Reichsarchiv, 105-106.
76 Ibid., 106-107.
CHAPTER IV
THE CHANGE IN COMMAND

It was not easy for Moltke to re-organize the 8th Army’s command. It was the first case of its kind since the war had begun. The situation in the East was still very vague. Furthermore, even given the unique German command and staff system, finding the right man to assume an independent command in such a difficult situation was not easy. The elder Moltke had attempted to develop a system of training guaranteeing that any senior officer of the General Staff would, when confronted by a given set of circumstances, take approximately the same action as any other. There was to be no place for the kind of errant genius which might confuse its own command as much as the enemy. And as the size of armies and their area of operation increased, it became even more necessary, in the opinion of the General Staff, that the men selected for independent command should act according to known patterns, thereby reducing the chances for misunderstanding. Boldness, however, was generally encouraged, lessening to a degree the rigidity of the system. Rashness was much more readily forgiven than timidity or inaction—a François would keep his command when a Frittwitz would be relieved.

And Frittwitz was not the only one relieved. Walderssee, his Chief of Staff, also had to go. The command system of the German Army had the Chief of Staff the real power figure in any headquarters. He was directly responsible to OHL as well as to his immediate commander; he bore the real responsibility for the success

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or failure of his army's operations. His was the really important office: "The posts of high distinction were customarily reserved either for royalty or for old age." Despite his previous good record, Waldersee had failed to control the situation; the price he paid was removal. In view of the obvious crisis in the East, the best possible replacement for him must be found—and OHL believed it had the right man. At 9 A.M. on the 22nd, Major General Erich Ludendorff received two letters, one from the Chief of Staff and one from the Quartermaster-General. Moltke's informed him that:

A new and difficult task is entrusted to you....I know of no other man in whom I have such absolute trust. You may yet be able to save the situation in the East....Of course you will not be made responsible for what has already happened, but with your energy you can prevent the worst from happening.

Von Stein's letter was written in a similar vein; he concluded by saying, "Your task is a difficult one, but you are equal to it."

This despatch also ordered Ludendorff to report to Coblenz immediately. At noon on the 22nd, while he was still en route, his appointment as Chief of Staff of the 8th Army was confirmed by the Kaiser.

At 6 P.M., Ludendorff arrived at Coblenz and promptly reported to OHL. There he learned for the first time of the recent events in East Prussia. Moltke informed him that the 8th Army had

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4 Ibid., 50.
5 Goldsmith and Voigt, 95.
been defeated at Gumbinnen and was in full retreat over the Angerapp and behind the Deime. The I Corps was moving by rail to Gosselshausen, where it was to be at the disposal of the Army Commander; the 3rd Reserve Division was moving south to support the XX Corps. According to Moltke, Prittwitz was planning to withdraw across the Vistula and await reinforcements. Ludendorff says he viewed the situation as "serious but not impossible." Based only on the sketchy information he had been given, he immediately issued his first orders. The I Reserve Corps, the XVII Corps, and the Boerdack Division were to be given a rest on the 23rd. The I Corps was to detrain, not at Gosselshausen, but somewhere east of Eylau, nearer von Scholtz' position. All available units from the Vistula fortresses were to report to Strassburg and Lauenburg, to strengthen the garrisons there. The Army Headquarters was to meet him in Marienburg. Ludendorff seems to have regarded this Headquarters as being out of the picture. At any rate he bypassed it, issuing his orders directly to the units concerned. Ludendorff does not seem to have been aware at this time of the orders which had been issued on the night of the 20th at Hoffmann's inspiration. His memoirs make no mention of them; none of his critics have ever claimed that he knew anything at all about them. With this in mind, Ludendorff cannot be denied either the credit of instantly realizing the situation with only sketchy information or the courage to issue orders on his own responsibility. That Ludendorff and Hoffmann arrived at almost the same conclusions,

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6 Ludendorff, 52-55.
7 Ironside, 147.
though one was on the ground and the other several hundred miles away, is a real proof of the high level of training and ability existing in the General Staff.

Ludendorff left Coblenz by special train at 9 P.M., with orders to pick up the new army commander on the way east. The selection of this man had also been a difficult task. An exceptionally good knowledge of human nature was necessary to form a team under the German command system. Prittwitz and Waldersee had been selected long before the war; now a new combination had to be improvised literally overnight. Moreover, Ludendorff was not an easy man to work with. He was a

man of burning ambition and tremendous will power... and a master of detail, but no great spirit...without the slightest touch of humor or self-criticism to relieve his arrogant complacency.8

Prittwitz was no less stubborn. Even if OHL had not lost confidence in him, a pairing of these men would probably have proven unfortunate. The officers chiefly responsible for choosing the new commander, Lt. Gen. von Lyncker and Col. Freiherr von Mar- schall, had a difficult task. The first considered the elder von der Goltz, but he too seemed temperamentally unsuited to co-operate with Ludendorff. At the least, someone calm and steady, a man able to get along with almost anyone, would be required. Then, before any other names were brought up, one of the junior officers suggested a distant cousin of his, Paul Beneckendorff und Hinden-

9 Goerlitz, Hindenburg, 58.
burg. He had the seniority and he wanted an active assignment; on August 12, he had written to von Stein in Berlin asking not to forget him if a higher commander were needed. In several ways he was an ideal choice. His health was good. He had lived for a long time in the East. He was famous for his imperturbability—nerves never troubled him. Moreover, he was living in retirement in Hanover, on the most direct route to East Prussia. The decision was made. At 3 P.M. on the 20th, Hindenburg received a telegram from Coblenz asking if he were prepared for immediate employment. He answered simply, "I am ready." OHL seems to have been sure of this, at least. Even before the wire could have reached Coblenz he received three more in succession. These informed him respectively that Ludendorff was to be assigned as his Chief of Staff, that he was to command the 8th Army, and that a special train would pick him up at 3 A.M. on the 23rd.

Groener says that while the choice of Ludendorff was universally welcomed, Hindenburg was "a blank page for most of us." He was in many ways a typical old-school Prussian officer, with all the strengths and weaknesses of the class. He was moved by duty more than ambition; his tastes and outlook were those of a

10 Wheeler-Bennet, 14.
11 Goerlitz, Hindenburg, 54.
12 Ludendorff, 82-84.
14 Ibid.
15 Groener, 164-165.
courtly gentleman rather than a man of the world. It is perhaps ironic that his last active service had been as commander of the IV Corps, where Prittitz had been one of his division commanders and von François had served as his Chief of Staff.

At 4 A.M. on the 23rd the train arrived—one hour late—and one of the great partnerships of military history began. For about thirty minutes Ludendorff briefed Hindenburg on the general situation and on the orders which he had already issued. "Before long," Hindenburg says, "we were at one in our view of the situation." At the moment, both men agreed the important thing was to keep the 8th Army east of the Vistula. To help ensure that, the I Corps must not be brought too far west, but instead turned south behind the right wing of the XX Corps. All else would be left for decision at Army Headquarters. Then, since there was nothing else to be done, the two generals went to bed.

The exact relationship between Hindenburg and Ludendorff probably will never be determined. Hindenburg himself characterized it as "a happy marriage....In such a relationship, how can a third party clearly distinguish the merits of the individuals....They are one in thought and action." Hindenburg had been a Chief of Staff himself; he knew that the degree to which commander and Chief of Staff were able to co-operate was largely a matter of

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16 Rosinski, 150.
17 Goerlitz, Hindenburg, 42.
18 Hindenburg, 61.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 62.
personalities. He was always willing "to give scope to the intel-
lectual powers, the almost superhuman capacity for work, and the
untiring resolution of my Chief of Staff...[his] work." Lud-
dendorff in his memoirs says that "for many years Hindenburg and
I worked together like one man in the most perfect harmony...our...
views were in complete agreement and harmonious co-operation
was the result." Ludendorff was certainly the brains of the com-
bination. He was a good strategist and a hard worker, with an
original mind. But his weak nerves tended to make him prone to
moments of panic. Hindenburg was able to balance his Chief’s
qualities almost perfectly. His mature judgments and iron stead-
fastness provided a solid base for Ludendorff’s brilliance.
His role was not a spectacular one. It was in a sense negative,
noticed only if it should be absent. To this extent, it had led
to a certain downgrading of Hindenburg’s place in the partner-
ship. But a partnership it was in the best sense of the word,
through its great days were as yet far in the future as the spe-
cial train crossed Germany in the early hours of the 23rd.

21 Ibid., 63.
22 Ludendorff, 14.
23 Wheeler-Bennett, 17-18.
CHAPTER V
THE 8th ARMY MOVES SOUTH
See Maps 5 and 6

Eighth Army Headquarters first learned of the change in command on the afternoon of the 22nd, when Max Hoffmann called the Chief of Staff of the I Corps to check on Russian movements in that area. Instead of answering the question, Schmidtseck asked Hoffmann if he knew what had happened. Hoffmann said "no." Von Schmidtseck replied that he did not feel called upon to enlighten him—he would learn soon enough. A few minutes later, Major Kersten brought in a telegram announcing the arrival of a special train with a new commander and Chief of Staff. The official telegram superseding Prittwitz and Waldersee arrived a half-hour later. As Hoffmann said, the manner of disposing of these two previously highly-regarded officers was "a bit abrupt"—but OHL was in no mood for courtesy. It is pointless to discuss whether the relief of these men was justified. Their actions since the beginning of the campaign had inspired confidence in neither superiors nor subordinates. Perhaps they might have been more successful had they been able to execute their own plan instead of having so many of their decisions forced by François' actions. It is hard, however, to disagree with OHL's view that after Gumbinnen, new blood was needed in the East. In terms of morale, at least, almost any change would have been for the better.

Of the new team, Hindenburg was relatively unknown outside his old corps district, and few of the officers of the 8th Army

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1 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 252-253.
staff were acquainted with him. Ludendorff, on the other hand, was a well-known personage in General Staff circles. Hoffmann himself had served with him. They had been stationed at Posen together, and from 1909 to 1913, they had lived at the same house in Berlin. There was little time, however, for anyone to study the personalities of the new commanders. By the afternoon of the 23rd the situation in the south appeared increasingly serious. The Austrian offensive in Galicia had begun a week before. On the 21st, Conrad had contacted both OHL and the 8th Army and expressed an urgent request for a German offensive to support his own. This was obviously impossible. The Russian 2nd Army was advancing on a sixty-kilometer front from Soldau to Orteilsburg; strong cavalry forces were advancing on its right. On the 22nd, Colonel Hell had telephoned again, this time to express anxiety about the left flank of the XX Corps. He said that it was possible that the Russians might outflank it before the I Corps would arrive. To prevent this, he requested that the 3rd Reserve Division detrain at Allenstein and move from there to the left of the XX Corps instead of its right. The Russian center was by this time so close, said Hell, that von Scholtz counted on a battle by the 24th, at the latest. It was with this prospect in mind, then, that the Army Staff went to Marienburg to meet its new commanders.

Ludendorff reports that the mood at Marienburg was “anything

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2 Hoffmann, War of Lost Opportunities, 33-34.
3 Hützendorff, IV, 455-458.
4 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 252.
5 Reichsarchiv, 115.
but cheerful," and Hoffmann himself admits "a feeling among the staff of depressment and discouragement," though he calls this a natural consequence of the change in command. Ludendorff seems to have been a bit pessimistic, for he came to Marienburg expecting to find a paralyzed staff and drifting army. Instead, Hoffmann quotes him as being "very surprised" to find that all of the preliminary orders for a concentration against the 2nd Army had been issued. Possibly too, neither Hindenburg nor Ludendorff were really pleased with the role the G.S.O.I. had played in the issuing of these orders. To some extent at least, he had anticipated them. It is noteworthy that Hoffmann's name does not appear at all in Hindenburg's memoirs, while Ludendorff gives him but scant credit for his part in developing the plan. In any case, both staff officers had the same general idea—to disengage from Rennenkampf and concentrate in the region of Osterode against the 2nd Army. Certainly Hoffmann's orders, based on much closer knowledge of the situation, best facilitated this plan. It would have been imprudent, to say the least, for Ludendorff to prescribe a detailed battle combination from Coblenz. But it is right in character for him to deny Hoffmann's role in doing so. He was never a man to credit others at his own expense. Interestingly enough, this

6 Ludendorff, 55.
7 Hoffmann, Tannenberg, 255.
8 Ibid.
9 Ironside, 149.
10 Churchill, 185.
11 Ironside, 149.
contrasts with Hoffmann's memoirs, which give Frittwitz a good share of the credit for the orders issued on the night of the 20th. Hindenburg, Ludendorff, and Hoffmann were in agreement on one point: everything which could be of the slightest use in mobile warfare must be thrown into the battle in the south. Hindenburg and Ludendorff were given for the first time a full report on the preceding operations. The morale of the troops, they were told, was good, "and therefore justified bold decisions." Hindenburg and Hoffmann, at least, were relatively unconcerned about the Russian numerical superiority—according to Hoffmann, the Russian Army "had not improved very much since Manchuria." Ludendorff, however, was not at all sure that it would be possible to move the XVII Corps and the I Reserve Corps from the north as planned. If Rennenkampf were to follow up his success and advance quickly, he said, the 2 corps would have to retire southwest toward Wormditt while the rest of the army attacked to delay Samsonov. In case this attack failed, the 8th Army would try to establish a defensive line east of the Vistula, holding the bridgeheads until reinforcements could arrive from the Western front. The planning undertaken at this conference was made easier by some unexpected good fortune. A set of notes had been found on the body of a Russian officer. These notes revealed that the 2nd Army had

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13 Ibid., 67.
14 Ludendorff, 56.
15 Hindenburg, 66-67.
16 Goerlitz, Hindenburg, 65.
already extended itself further west than originally planned. Theoretically, therefore, the proposed German attack should have a good chance of success—it would be made against a scattered enemy. Furthermore, the fear of a Russian thrust in the center, along the Graebo axis, was definitely proved groundless. It was now highly probable that the XVII Corps and the I Reserve Corps would be able to withdraw in time to join the battle in the south—but it was not certain. Ludendorff, at least, remained unconvinced.

In addition to a situation report, Hindenburg and Ludendorff also were given a full account of von François' actions since the start of the campaign. Ludendorff had served with François on the staff of the IV Corps in 1890, and evidently thought very little of him. He wrote later that François had only been appointed to the General Staff because of his father's service in 1870. In any case, he was still unwilling to reveal his plans fully to the commander of the I Corps. François, who arrived at Magdeburg about 7 P.M., was informed only that his corps was to strike the flank and rear of the 2nd Army from the west. He returned to his headquarters almost as ignorant of the general situation as before.

But despite Ludendorff's concern the 1st Army was not advancing. This was a surprise. Rennenkampf, an old cavalryman, had been especially selected for his aggressiveness; the Russian High

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17 Hindenburg, 64.
18 Goerlitz, Hindenburg, 66.
19 François, 197.
Command was confident that he would pursue the Germans immediately. At the very least he could use his cavalry to follow them. But, although the German retreat must certainly have been clear to him by the 23rd, he refused to move. The reasons for his tardiness have long been debated. Max Hoffmann suggests that the real reason was an old feud with Samsonov, a feud which originated in the Russo-Japanese War and culminated in a scuffle between the two generals at the railway station in Mukden. In his later years, he would often say, "if the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, the battle of Tannenberg was lost on the railway platform at Mukden." Whether it is true or not, an examination of Hoffmann's memoirs reveals that his belief in this feud had much to do with his continued confidence in the days ahead. In any case, it is highly improbable that this alone could be the real reason. The 1st Army was in an extremely bad condition after Gumbinnen. Golovine says, in fact, that Rennenkampf's staff was of the opinion that a retreat was essential. The German attack on the 20th had staggered them. Casualties had been heavy; supplies and ammunition were almost gone; the reserve units had not yet come up. Then, for no apparent reason, the Germans had begun to retreat.

Why? There was one explanation both qualifying and comforting: the repulse of the XVII Corps and the resulting heavy casualties had panicked the Germans and they were retiring as fast

20 Danilov, 208.
21 Wheeler-Bennett, 20-21.
22 Golovine, 1914, 155.