The 1914 battle of the Marne and the 1940 battle of the Meuse are two of the most famous battles of the twentieth century. In 1914 France lost the battle of the frontiers and won the “miracle of the Marne.” The victory on the Marne brought elation and celebration; the French had parried the Germans’ knockout blow and driven them back from the outskirts of Paris. Victory in the war, however, came only after four more years of huge battles and terrible casualties. In 1940 France suffered a crushing defeat after the Germans broke through French defenses along the Meuse near Sedan. Although the French remained in the fight for another month, the armistice on June 22, 1940, brought immediate pain and shame and swept France from the first rank of world powers. Rarely has a world power been defeated so quickly and so decisively. Except for a common enemy, Germany, and a common ally, Great Britain, the battles are more different than they are similar. Among the differences, the French suffered three to four times as many killed-in-action in the victory of August–September 1914 than in the defeat of May–June 1940. Other differences appear in the French preparation for and conduct of the two battles. An analysis of these differences suggests France had the capability and opportunity to respond to Germany’s actions in 1914 but had neither the capability nor the opportunity to respond in 1940.

In 1914 the battle of the Marne was the culmination of a month-long campaign that ranged across the entire northeastern and northern frontier of France. When the war began, the first clash between the Germans and French occurred when the Germans sent a cavalry raid on August 2 across the Franco-German frontier. The first large operation began on August 7, when General Joseph Joffre pushed a corps forward into Alsace. Although thousands of cheering Alsatians lined the route of advance, things went badly almost immediately. One regimental commander sitting astride a handsome white horse was severely wounded as he tried to lead his regiment forward. Soldiers in his regiment also suffered heavily when they fixed bayonets and charged...
the Germans. The second large operation began on August 14 when Joffre, thinking the main German forces would drive into France at points no deeper than Sedan or Montmédy, launched an attack into Lorraine. While the first attack into Alsace sought to reinforce public confidence, the second, a much larger operation, aimed to inflict serious damage on the enemy and aid Russia’s offensive into Germany. Joffre held back, however, the main mass of his forces west of Luxembourg (Third and Fourth armies) and awaited the right moment for unleashing them into what he thought was the weakened center of German forces in eastern Belgium. Much to his surprise, this attack into eastern Belgium on August 21 also failed. The unsuccessful operations in the battle of the frontiers demonstrated clearly the inadequacy of French operational and tactical preparation and unveiled the main German attack through central Belgium toward Paris across Liège, Namur, and Maubeuge.

After the disasters in Alsace and Lorraine, the French shifted their focus and effort to their left wing. The highly efficient French railway system could move an entire corps from Joffre’s right to his left in five or six days. Joffre first tried to envelop the German flank near Amiens but, when this failed, he began pulling French forces farther back. From August 30 to September 5, soldiers in the Fifth Army withdrew some 140 kilometers. On September 1 French and British aviation reported German columns moving east of Paris. Two days later Joffre, relying on additional aviation reports and on intercepted German radio traffic, learned that the entire German First Army, on the enemy’s far right, was moving east of Paris. Yet, Joseph Gallieni’s much-celebrated strike from Paris (including the famous “taxis of the Marne”) into the vulnerable flank of the Germans as they passed east of Paris did not halt the enemy’s advance. The battle of the Marne itself occurred between September 5 and 12. After the Germans passed east of Paris and drove farther south, the French halted them along the Marne and counterattacked. Meanwhile, Gallieni’s attack caused German leaders to bring forces back from their forward-most point of advance and open a hole in German lines. As other French forces returned to the offensive, General Sir John French’s British Expeditionary Force and General Louis Franchet d’Espèrey’s Fifth Army advanced cautiously through the unexpected opening and forced the Germans to withdraw. In the aftermath, the sobriquet “miracle of the Marne” seemed eminently appropriate, for the French had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.