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# Debating Cannae: Delbrück, Schlieffen, and the Great War

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Debating Cannae: Delbrück, Schlieffen, and the Great War

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A thesis

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Master of Arts in History

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by

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May 2014

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Keywords: Nationalism, Delbrück, Schlieffen, German War Planning, Germany, Sedan, Moltke, War Enthusiasm, German Wars of Unification, World War I

## ABSTRACT

Debating Cannae: Delbrück, Schlieffen, and the Great War

by

Andrew L. Jones

*Debating Cannae: Delbrück, Schlieffen, and the Great War* provides the reader a view of the historical struggle between Alfred von Schlieffen and Hans Delbrück. They argued fiercely about the foundation of the German Empire and the use of history. The first chapter provides the context of the foundation of the German empire. The second chapter explores the debates between Schlieffen and Delbrück by investigating their writings. The third chapter surveys the effect that the Delbrück and Schlieffen culture war had upon the First World War. This work expands the current view of Schlieffen by demonstrating his commitment to his interpretation of history. The reader will gain an appreciation for the impact of the historical struggle between these two historians. Delbrück believed that nationalism needed to be controlled through objectivity and a contextual understanding; in contrast, Schlieffen believed that nationalism needed to direct one's historical research as well as one's life.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Nationalism challenges objectivity in every way; its propensity for myths began a culture war in Germany between Alfred Graf von Schlieffen and Hans Delbrück. Schlieffen was the German Chief of General Staff from 1891 through 1905. Delbrück was a professional historian from the University of Berlin. Delbrück tried to counter the effects of nationalism in his country by writing objective history that included the necessary context. Schlieffen, in contrast, attempted to use a nationalistic version of history in order to help solve some of the problems that faced the German people. While Delbrück believed that nationalism needed to be controlled in the minds of his countrymen through a strong emphasis on context and objectivity, Schlieffen argued for his myth in addition to subjectivity. Schlieffen asserted that history only existed for the purposes of the future. Delbrück maintained that history existed outside of the needs of the present or the future. Both men understood that their arguments would affect not only the study of history but the German culture and military as well. Schlieffen eventually triumphed in the culture war against Delbrück and gave the German military the false premise that it possessed a unique way of war.

Schlieffen promoted a myth around the Battle of Sedan from the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-1871. The myth of Sedan claimed that the Germans possessed their own unique way of war that centered upon encircling their enemies. He often wrote about the ancient example of the battle of Cannae that happened in 216 B.C. when the Carthaginian General Hannibal Barca encircled and destroyed his Roman opponents. He claimed that the German commander in the Franco-Prussian War, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, had unlocked the German way of war. Schlieffen interpreted military history to promote the idea of a German way of war. Schlieffen

used history to promote this idea and to impress his own stratagems upon the military officers of the young German Empire. The myth promoted the idea that only large-scale encirclements could provide strategic victories in future wars.

One of the fundamental questions of the Twentieth Century was, why did the peoples of Europe continue the First World War when it became clear that the war would drag out for years? There is no universal answer to this question. For the Germans, a major participant, the victorious Battle of Tannenberg was central to their continued support. Historians often recognize that “war enthusiasm in Germany developed during the course of August: it followed the war’s outbreak rather than preceded it.”<sup>1</sup> The myth of Sedan explains why the battle was so central to the continuation of the First World War. Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, the chief of the German General Staff, developed the myth in order to provide a national *Heimat* (homeland) for the German people through history.

Delbrück and Schlieffen’s culture war directly affected the First World War. Schlieffen’s interpretations led the German military to pursue battles of annihilation or *Vernichtungsschlachten*. Delbrück had warned that Schlieffen’s misinterpretations of military history could lead the military to reach dangerous conclusions. The military, however, pursued annihilation in the opening months of the First World War and failed to secure a strategic victory. Schlieffen based all of his theories upon the myth of Sedan. Schlieffen built the myth of Sedan on the foundation of the German Empire in the 1870s.

The Germans longed for their own national *Heimat*, a place where they belonged and felt at home. Each region had its own smaller version of homeland, but the Germans throughout the centuries had never had their own nation. The British and the French knew where they belonged,

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<sup>1</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War: to arms*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 153.

geographic locations tied to illustrious histories, and this is precisely what the Germans desired. In many cases, their search for *Heimat* involved political unification and unity on a national scale. But, it also was the sense of belonging and unity that motivated the Germans in their hunt for *Heimat*.

Prussia and the other German states formed the German Empire in 1871 at the close of the Franco-Prussian War in order to bring the long-divided states together. However, the unification proved ineffectual due to the lack of unity amongst the Germans themselves. The goal of German leaders was to create a *Kulturnation*, a nation bound by language, culture, and history. The leaders of the Kaiserreich experimented with a wide variety of solutions that they hoped would unify the country. In the 1880s, Chancellor Bismarck launched the *Kulturkampf* or culture war that aimed at breaking the political power of groups that were perceived as owing allegiance outside of the empire. The *Kulturkampf*, that first targeted Catholics and then socialists, aimed at creating harmony within the empire by targeting groups that allegedly owed allegiance to groups or individuals outside of the nation's borders.

The Long Depression that began in 1873 in Central Europe further emphasized the regionalism that clung tightly to the Kaiserreich. The Long Depression was a series of sharp economic boom and bust cycles that affected Europe, especially Central and Eastern Europe. Helmuth von Moltke the Elder recognized in the midst of the Long Depression that the "credit of a state above all rests on its security. What a panic would break out on the stock exchange, how greatly would all property relations be shaken, if the permanency of the German Empire could



even be doubted.”<sup>2</sup> He realized that such a possibility could easily exist, given the fractured status of the Germans

It was precisely the need for the *Kulturnation* and *Heimat* that many other countries and empires had for themselves that drove the German leaders to apply various solutions to the problem. While the politicians, composers, and artists of Germany have been researched for their efforts toward unity, the military continues to be labeled with the stereotypes of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Historians depict the General Staff as a clique of military officers who focused increasingly upon the operational and tactical aspects of war in an attempt to avoid the political struggles that hounded the War Ministry’s every turn.<sup>4</sup> In spite of all of the evidence, however, the military has not been examined for its part in the German search for a national *Heimat* (homeland).

The officers of the German General Staff, with Schlieffen at their head, applied their technical skill to provide the *Heimat* that the Germans believed was necessary for their new empire. Historians focus primarily upon the constant calls for an increase in the size and resources of the military that originated in the General Staff. They also argue that the German General Staff eagerly desired a general European conflict that would vindicate the years they had spent planning. Historians continue to study Schlieffen’s life and his works in nearly endless volumes that exhaust nearly every aspect of his life. Schlieffen’s position as Chief of General Staff and his war plans spark never ending debates as well as further research on these aspects of his life.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War: selected writings*, trans. Daniel J. Hughes and Harry Bell, (Novato: Presidio Press, 1993), 29.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Förster, ed., *Die Wehrpflicht: Entstehung, Formen und politisch-militärische Wirkung*, (Munich: R. Oldenburg, 1994), and Michael Geyer, *Deutsche Rüstungspolitik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), passim.

<sup>4</sup> Stig Förster, *Der doppelte Militarismus : die deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik zwischen Status-quo-Sicherung und Aggression, 1890-1913* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1985), and Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: military culture and the practices of war in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), passim.

While military officers and historians have spilled a veritable sea of ink upon the pages of history; they universally overlook the key factor of Schlieffen's career, his use of the past. Schlieffen wrote war plans like other Chiefs of General Staff; however, his primary focus was upon military history and specifically how it affected German military history. He wrote numerous volumes to back his claims about his two principle examples, the battles of Sedan and Cannae. He argued that Hannibal's victory over the Romans in antiquity at the Battle of Cannae showed the importance of battles of encirclement. He also asserted vociferously that the Germans possessed a unique way of war that was demonstrated before the watching world at Sedan, in 1870, in the same type of encirclement battle as Cannae.

But the struggle for the past included not only Schlieffen and the German General Staff but also Hans Delbrück, a professional historian from the University of Berlin, who joined the fray for what he believed to be the very soul of the German people. Delbrück wanted to secure objective history from men like Schlieffen who openly viewed history as a tool to be used. He seemed to ignore any benefits that Schlieffen's methods could have reaped and instead fought for objective military history even to the detriment of his career. In his works, Delbrück included spheres previously hostile to one another, economic, political, and military history. His narratives helped to lay the foundation for all modern history.

He failed, however, to win his duel with Schlieffen over the use of history. Delbrück's works failed to cement the importance of objectivity in history within the minds of his fellow Germans. He would face attacks not only from Schlieffen's officers but from his own colleagues and even the royal family. Even the Kaiser himself would single out the professor from Berlin for being troublesome, not only to the monarchy but to the whole of the German people.

Delbrück's professional defeat following World War I laid the foundation for the Stab-In-The-Back Myth that undermined the Weimar Republic. The politicians, military officers, and even the average veterans all accepted the myth. The politicians and the military men knew that the Entente had defeated Germany in 1918, yet, they continuously claimed otherwise. They did so because history had lost all purpose other than to provide for the nation. Based on Schlieffen's principle of history, which he dogmatized in the myth of Sedan, the Stab-In-The-Back Myth needed to be promoted above any sort of objective truth. For the German officers and the politicians of Weimar Germany the myth afforded them maneuverability that the truth could not have given them.

In both the Austro-Prussian War and the Franco-Prussian War, the two primary parts of the German Wars of Unification, the brutal reality did not fit with the picture portrayed by the myth of Sedan. In the Austro-Prussian War, the Prussians defeated the German coalition in the West and then defeated the Austrians in a decisive battle. Nowhere in the Austro-Prussian War did the Prussians encircle their opponents. In the Franco-Prussian War, the Prussians defeated the French due to mistakes by the French generals. In the Battle of Sedan, the French commander situated his forces in an ideal location for encirclement and paused long enough for Moltke's coalition to destroy his forces. The Prussians then went on to encircle Paris and eventually forced a peace settlement. Moltke in his own accounts of the war never stated that Sedan was anything more than another stepping stone to the victory at Paris. The myth that developed about the foundation of the German Empire became the heart of the debate between the two most important historians from the 1880s through the 1900s.

Hans Delbrück and Alfred Graf von Schlieffen both covered the same subjects, but in different ways in order to best promote their divergent goals. Schlieffen climbed to his position

as the chief of general staff after the Long Depression had ended and at the beginning of a period of rapid economic expansion. He first explained his historical theories in various war games, known as general staff rides, to the officers he was responsible for training. After he secured the loyalty of the army's officers, Schlieffen set out to destroy Delbrück. He wrote his own historical works and dogmatized the myth of Sedan. Delbrück, a professor at the University of Berlin, worried about the lack of objective history in Germany and sought to change that through his own contribution to the study. He wrote lengthy works that sought to objectively interpret history. Delbrück toiled tirelessly for the fate of history in the German Empire.

The historical struggle impacted numerous aspects of German society; one clear piece of evidence was in the war planning. The war planning set the stage for the fruition of all of Schlieffen's labors. The loyal followers of Schlieffen planned and executed a war of his fashion. They used the mythical German way of war that Schlieffen had shown them in an attempt to win the Great War. They planned great encirclements and the defeat of nations. In addition they planned ways to avoid being encircled themselves. No longer did the Germans speak of turning movements (*Umgehung*), instead, they thought only of encirclements and battles of destruction (*Vernichtungsschlacht*).

All of these myths and deaths provided the primary link from Bismarckian Germany to the Third Reich. Schlieffen's long-divided people finally unified as a result of the victory of Tannenberg. Tannenberg unified the Germans as never before due to its perception as the vindication of the myth of Sedan. From Tannenberg, and following defeat in The Great War, German leaders quickly developed the Stab-In-The-Back Myth that dominated the Weimar and Nazi periods. The myth that the Germans possessed a singular way of war, a way that involved aggressive encirclements and the grandest of victories, captivated the populace. It also claimed

that the German way of war could not be defeated by the simplistic methods of the other peoples of the globe due to the superiority of the German way. A major German defeat, as suffered in 1918, therefore, could only be explained through the misdeeds of profiteers, traitors, and other enemies within the bosom of the nation. The footsteps of doom echoed in the idea that history should be used in order to provide for the cultural wellbeing of the nation.

The fires of war produced fields ripe with stories to be used for the societal good of the new divided German Empire. The sacrifice of average men in the creation of a new country often produces excellent material for those who seek it. The stories centered on the most glorious victory and the commander who orchestrated the path of the German forces. The Battle of Sedan became even more of a focal point than Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke.

The Chiefs of General Staff after Helmuth von Moltke elevated his victory at Sedan to an even more mythological status than the Kaiser or the German people ever did. Indeed, they were not alone in the near-worship of Moltke and the victory at Sedan. The German people collectively idolized the warrior who brought forth the German Empire and glorified his victory over Napoleon III's French Empire. The King of Prussia ennobled Moltke, making him a count in October of 1870, specifically mentioning his victory at the Battle of Sedan. The encirclement at Sedan became the obsession of the German army after Moltke retired in 1888.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE AUSTRO-PRUSSIAN WAR

The Battle of Königgrätz set the stage for the myth of Sedan, the battle was a critical component in the construction of the myth of Sedan. Königgrätz's importance was largely due to its strategic nature in the Austro-Prussian War as well as Moltke's use of operational maneuvers. The Battle of Königgrätz gave the Prussians the type of victory that Napoleon had gained at places such as of the Battles of Jena and Austerlitz. The decisive nature propelled Moltke to the forefront of the Prussian people's minds. It also created the aura of a champion around Moltke, further laying the foundation for the myth that provided the false hope of the Germans in 1914.

In 1864, after the conclusion of the Second Schleswig War, King Wilhelm allowed Chief of General Staff Helmuth von Moltke and War Minister von Roon to reform the army as they saw fit. The principle Prussian commander, the decrepit Field Marshal von Wrangle, bedecked with medals thanks to his service in the Napoleonic Wars, barely moved his forces along. He seemed unwilling to engage his numerically inferior opponents. Wrangle proved so incompetent that he was removed from his post and sent to Berlin in the middle of the war. The conflict against the Danes had shown many of the weaknesses of the Prussian military in spite of its advanced rifle, the Dreyse Zündnadelgewehr, or the Dreyse Needle Rifle.

The experimental weapon of the Prussians seemed to be a failure in the eyes of foreign observers. The Austrians noted that the rate of ammunition expenditure by Prussian troops was so high that the Prussian troops could not hope to stand in combat against the shock tactics that were used by French and Austrian troops. The Austrians themselves had recently experienced the power of the old-fashioned shock tactics when the Austrian troops were swept off of their

positions at Solferino by the French in 1859.<sup>5</sup> Moltke would prove that the new tactics of the Prussian forces would exploit the weapon to its fullest extent against the Austrians during the Austro-Prussian War.

Moltke took many lessons from his first European war, but one of his conclusions directly affected both the myth and the Austro-Prussian War. He believed that railways provided the opportunity to enhance the mobility of Prussian infantry on a scale never before seen on the European continent. Both Moltke's planning and Prussian infantry performance proved to be unstoppable in the successful amphibious assault on Alsen and the Battle of Lundby.<sup>6</sup> Moltke decided that it was imperative to combine the Dreyse Rifle and the Prussian railroad system in order to firmly secure the initiative in future wars. Moltke wrote, "every new development" of steam engines and railways was "a military advantage; and for the national defense a few million [marks] on the completion of our railways is far more profitably employed than on our new fortresses."<sup>7</sup> Moltke developed a grid system for Prussian mobilization and planned an initial *Aufmarsch* (mobilization) chart based on the importance of the railroad in future wars.<sup>8</sup> His experiences led him to believe that the Prussians could win a war primarily from the operational freedom provided by the proper use of their railroads.

The Austro-Prussian War provided not only a background for the myth of Sedan, but it also provided the truly decisive element lacked by the focal point of the myth. The Battle of Königgrätz was strategically decisive in the Brother's War between the various German states.<sup>9</sup> Although the Prussians failed to encircle the Austro-Saxon forces in the battle, the outcome of

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick Schneid, *The Second War of Italian Unification 1859-61*, (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2012), 40-45.

<sup>6</sup> F. J. G. graf von Waldersee, *Krieg gegen Dänemark im Jahre 1864*, (Berlin: Alexander Duncker, 1865), 506-508.

<sup>7</sup> Helmuth graf von Moltke, *Vermischte Schriften des Grafen Helmuth von Moltke*, (Berlin: E.S. Mittler, 1892), 229.

<sup>8</sup> Eberhard Kessel, *Moltke*, (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler, 1957), 321.

<sup>9</sup> The Battle of Königgrätz is usually referred to as the Battle of Sadowa by Anglo-French writers and occasionally by American historians. For the sake of continuity, this author will refer to the battle as Königgrätz unless otherwise directed by primary source material.

the battle decided the result of the war. After the battle, Moltke fundamentally altered the Prussian army by reorganizing the Prussian cavalry and reforming the primary functions of the artillery. These reforms provided the essential groundwork for the German victory in the Franco-Prussian War.

The Austro-Prussian War was a “quick and violent solution to the Italian and German questions, two European disputes that had been simmering since the French Revolutionary Wars.”<sup>10</sup> The clash would set into motion the solution of the German question that had plagued Europe since the rise of nationalism. The war also proved Moltke’s prowess as a military reformer and an operational commander of the first class. He was aided by Austrian incompetence and hampered by ineptitude within the ranks of the Prussian officer corps, who were often far from the battle-hardened elites often portrayed within the chronicles of the war.

Prussia had prepared itself for war continually since 1859. Its booming economy financed massive increases in strategic railroad construction. Moltke busily war gamed each year and worked to prepare the Prussian staff officers to handle the problems of combat. The evidence for Moltke’s efforts manifested themselves not in his writings but in the Prussian mobilization time chart. The Prussians, thanks to the General Staff reformed by Minister of War von Roon and Chief of General Staff von Moltke, were able to mobilize in half of the time it would take the Austrians to mobilize.<sup>11</sup>

Prussia found Austria wholly unprepared for war. The Prussians faced an Austrian military system that was arthritic at best and crippled at its worst. The Austrian system included seventeen independent departments, and the general staff system was so decrepit that its own

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<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War: Austria’s war with Prussia and Italy in 1866*, (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Arden Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars, 1864-1871*, (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 104-105.



officers suggested its closure. As one historian notes, while the Austrians had a department named “a ‘General Staff’ it was not one.”<sup>12</sup> Austria’s stunted economy only constructed one double-tracked line in its empire that ran from Vienna to Bohemia, while Prussia possessed five lines that led to Austrian territory.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to Moltke, the Austrian Feldzeugmeister Ludwig Benedek who was referred to in Berlin as “Austria’s Blücher” failed to grasp fundamental elements of strategy and neglected to conceive of the operational element of warfare entirely.<sup>14</sup> The Viennese press glowingly anointed Benedek as Austria’s “Second Radetzky,” referring to the hero of the suppression of the 1848 revolution, in spite of his lack of credentials and his notorious lack of strategic ability.<sup>15</sup> The added pressure of being linked with Austria’s savior by his own press did not help. Benedek made a good tactical commander; his skills only seemed to appear when his personal bravery could be brought to bear against his enemies in the field. He proved unable to command large groups of men in a more abstract fashion.

Although the Prussian king, many of his generals, and even the Prussian people desired to avoid a war with Austria, the Austrian leadership maintained their determination to come to blows with their northern brethren. As war approached in the spring of they quickly mobilized seventy infantry battalions and an entire cavalry division to the Austro-Prussian border in Bohemia. The Prussian King Wilhelm, in a fit of timidity, attempted to negotiate through the crisis as Austrian troops continued to pour into Bohemia, veritably destroying the best laid plans of Bismarck and Moltke. In the end, it was not Austrian bluster or Prussian timidity that forced fate’s ugly hand. Instead, the Italians, fearing a peaceful solution to the crisis and an end to their

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid,104.

<sup>13</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 50.

<sup>14</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 57

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 25.

attempts to take Austrian Venetia, fully mobilized on the Austrian border in late April of 1866. In response, the Prussians mobilized but sat immobile while the politicians attempted to mediate the situation one final time, wracking Moltke with angst about the possible war.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, King Wilhelm tampered with Moltke's plans with further timidity. Wilhelm ordered Moltke to disperse his armies in order to protect all of Prussian territory from a Benedek led Austrian assault. Moltke was ridiculed by the international press and even his own army commanders for the placement of his forces; in reality he had very little control over the strategic decision.<sup>17</sup> Even Moltke grumbled that he was forced to "disembark the Prussian army (at the railheads) on an arc five hundred kilometers in length," all of the way from Halle in the west to the Neisse River in the East.<sup>18</sup>

As a part of the myth of Sedan, the separation of the Prussian armies would be attributed to Moltke's brilliance as a component of the German way of war, with Moltke's alleged omniscient genius presenting itself before the first shot in the Brother's War against Austria. This was not due to a master plan to encircle the Austrian forces, however, but emerged out of fear of a Benedekian attack on Prussian Silesia. In fact, the chief of staff of the Prussian III Army, Field Marshal von Blumenthal, wrote in his diary, "I am afraid General Moltke is very much under the influence of others, and can come to no conclusion."<sup>19</sup> The image of Moltke as a demigod of war certainly changed from the early days in 1866 to his death in the 1880s.

The consensus of Austrian military leaders, whose overlapping elements of control remain confusing to this day, was to place the bulk of the Austrian forces at the fortress of Olmütz in Moravia. At Olmütz, the Austrians could block a Prussian offensive towards Vienna

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 50-55.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 54-56.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 21.

as well as defend against two potentially hostile Imperial Russian observation corps in Russian Poland and Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> On the eve of the war, Austrian agents had tapped the telegraph wire of the headquarters of the Prussian Second Army in a magnificent work of espionage. Benedek misread the information, however, noting but incorrectly assessing the transfer of the elite East Prussian First Corps and the Berlin Guards Corps to Silesia. He interpreted this information as confirmation of a Prussian plot to invade Austria from Silesia, in the same manner as Frederick the Great. Benedek based his plans upon history, pointing to Olmütz as the perfect Flankenstellung or flanking position to upset the Prussian plans.<sup>21</sup> However, the Austrians were not the only opponents facing the Prussian bid for power in Germany; they also faced the troops of the German federal armies of Hanover, Hesse-Kassel, Bavaria, and Saxony.

The middle states of Germany feared for their sovereignty even if they sided with Prussia in her struggle against Austria, and so they refused to repudiate their alliances with Austria. The disorganized units of the western German states, though, simply fled repeatedly from the advancing Prussian forces. They succeeded in escaping with their lives, but at a great cost of material. The Army of Hesse-Kassel arrived in Frankfurt without even the cartridges for their Prussian constructed rifles.<sup>22</sup> As the Prussian forces in the west trudged past broken railroads southwards, they were aided once again by the incompetence of their opponents.

The Prussian commander in the west, General Vogel von Falckenstein, kept Berlin's leadership in an almost continuous state of uproar with his ineptitude and indolence. His lackluster pursuit of the Hanoverians allowed them to close the distance between the fleeing northern Germans and their southern allies at Frankfurt am Main in spite of the pandemonium

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Generalstab des Österreichs Armee, *Österreichs Kämpfe im Jahre 1866: Nach Feldacten bearbeitet durch das k. k. Generalstabsbureau für Kriegsgeschichte*, Vol. 3, (Vienna: 1868), 33.

<sup>22</sup> Grosser Generalstab, *Feldzug 1866*, 50-55. Quoted in Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 77.

that ruled in the Hanoverian army.<sup>23</sup> The war before the Battle of Langensalza was not bloodless. But decision was not far away. General von Flies with a contingent of the Prussian force frontally assaulted the Hanoverian defensive position in the Battle of Langensalza on 27 June, 1866.

Flies suffered a ghastly tactical defeat but inflicted heavy casualties upon the Hanoverians who attempted repeated cavalry charges to sweep the Prussian infantry from the field. The Prussians, who were outnumbered two to one by the defenders, lost 845 dead and wounded with another 878 captured. Every attempt by the Hanoverians to sweep the Prussians from the field of battle with their cavalry cost more lives. The swift firing Prussian rifles devastated every attempt by their opponents to hound their escape. The Hanoverians, in contrast, lost 1,429 soldiers in their pyrrhic victory.<sup>24</sup> The Prussians surrendered the field but the Hanoverians were forced to surrender two days later to Falckenstein's corps due to their strategic defeat at Langensalza.

Many historians describe the Battle of Langensalza as a pointless battle; but it undermined part of the myth of Sedan before Moltke had achieved any major victories. The frontal assault by Prussian forces against the Hanoverians provided nothing exciting or unique for historians to analyze or extol. Historians traditionally treat the battle with varying degrees of disdain. Arden Bucholz claimed that the battle was a "disaster that accomplished nothing."<sup>25</sup> Bucholz's conclusion summarizes the historical tradition's interpretation of the events surrounding the battle.

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<sup>23</sup> Theodor Fontane, *Der deutsche Krieg von 1866*, Vol. 2, *Der Feldzug in West- und Mitteldeutschland*, (Berlin: R. Decker), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Citino, *The German Way of War*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2005), 159.

<sup>25</sup> Arden Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars...* 122.

Robert Citino in his paradigm setting work, The German Way of War claims that the Battle of Langensalza represented a Prusso-German way of war that dominated military thought from the Thirty Years War until the end of the Second World War. Citino argued that the battle in “its senseless bloodletting” was “a Prussian tradition.”<sup>26</sup> This tradition, Citino states, drove Flies to attack the entrenched Hanoverians. He further declares that Flies’s decision “was absolutely predictable. It was the Prussian way, dating back to the Great Elector Frederick William, to attack the enemy wherever he presented himself.”<sup>27</sup> Neither Citino’s interpretation nor the historical community’s view of the battle is correct because they fail to understand the purpose behind the battle and Moltke’s instructions.

Moltke viewed the operation as a success because it achieved the strategic goals he had established for the corps. Moltke did not judge individual actions on their own merit, but rather how they related to the strategic result. In the west, Langensalza defeated the Hanoverians by refusing them passage to unite with the southern Germans at Frankfurt am Main and provided Falkenstein the time he needed to arrive. Finally, Langensalza afforded Moltke the security to operate in Bohemia without fear of disaster on the smaller front in the west. By 29 June, three days before the Battle of Königgrätz, Moltke had orchestrated the defeat of Austria’s allies. No, one would come to Austria’s defense to alter Moltke’s opportunity.<sup>28</sup> Victory does not necessarily equate to tactical victory, it was a lesson that the myth of Sedan ignored entirely. The myth of Sedan partly relied upon Moltke’s purpose for battles and his view of victory. Moltke’s reaction to the battle of Battle of Langensalza debunks both of those aspects of the myth of Sedan.

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Citino, *The German Way of War...* 160.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>28</sup> Kessel, *Moltke, ...* 464-466.

Meanwhile, on 16 June, Moltke began what would be the beginning of the end of the short Austro-Prussian War by ordering Prussian armies to invade Saxony. Saxon engineers failed to destroy the rail lines running into Dresden from Prussia. This allowed the Prussian forces to slice into Saxony in great numbers, virtually unopposed. The small standing Saxon army fled by whatever means available to Austrian Bohemia to carry on the fight while a Prussian governor was established in the Saxon capital of Dresden. Moltke remained unsatisfied with the success, stating that “success [in Germany] is real only if we know how to maintain it, and the decision lies in Bohemia.”<sup>29</sup> His immediate success in a nearly bloodless conquest of Saxony was not a major strategic victory in Moltke’s mind. Moltke soon focused on the Austrian North Army and its enigmatic commander, Ludwig Benedek.

In Moravia, Benedek’s forces patiently awaited the arrival of the Prussians at the Feldzeugmeister’s (lieutenant-general) *Flankenstellung* or flanking position at the fortress of Olmütz. Perhaps, they waited too patiently; as Benedek and his officers staged concerts and enjoyed local attractions. Benedek’s actions were far too passive for Kaiser Franz Joseph who, on 16 June, ordered the general to move out to take up new positions around Josephstadt and Königgrätz. In order to compensate for the late date of the move, Benedek ordered the commander of the Austrian forces in Bohemia, General Clam-Gallas, to join the retreating Saxon forces behind the Iser River. He further stipulated that Clam-Gallas could retreat to the bridge at Josephstadt if the Prussian assault was too furious. Benedek, for his part, planned a great battle in the Napoleonic style where he would be able to conquer two Prussian armies and turn to destroy the final army in detail.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Moltke, *Strategy*, 43. Quoted in Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 124.

<sup>30</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 125-126.

The Austrian march tore at the North Army's morale and health because most of the Austrian troops had marched on foot from the eastern portions of the empire across some of the toughest terrain in Central Europe. Prince Emerich Taxis, the commander of Benedek's 2<sup>nd</sup> Light Cavalry Division, noted on the first day of the march, 17 June that he had been forced to arrest "a number of men from General Rothkirch's brigade". These men, a majority of them Hungarians, had simply thrown away their rifles and backpacks.<sup>31</sup> But the march's devastating effects were not limited to the troops from the poorest provinces or the ethnic minorities of empire. An officer of one of Benedek's elite Jäger regiments noted that the "men looked bad: their grey coats draped over their shirts, tunics balled up inside their backpacks, their haversack and rifle slings crossed on their chest and flapping to either side. My men were fairly crushed under all of these dangling appliances; they looked sloppy and were not comfortable."<sup>32</sup> None of the vaunted North Army's troops were exempt from the mortifying effects of the march, not even their commander.

The march seemed to take its toll on the commander of the North Army as well. Benedek sent confusing and contradictory messages to his forces in Bohemia on the eve of battle. The messages thoroughly bewildered Clam-Gallas and baffled the Saxon commander.<sup>33</sup> Benedek's original plan involved a fighting withdrawal by the Saxons from the Iser River positions to join Benedek and the North Army at Josephstadt. His newest messages, however, called for holding the river and repelling the Prussians at all cost. The actual situation formed a sharp contrast to the report in the *Manchester Guardian* which, on 20 June, had smugly stated that the Prussian Army under Moltke was commanded by a "commander-in-chief of the King,- that is to say, of a parade

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<sup>31</sup> Wawro, *Austro Prussian War...* 127.

<sup>32</sup> FML K. von Went., "Erinnerungen eines österreichischen Kriegsmannes 1866," *Österreichische Militärische Zeitung* 3 (1899), 263-264. Dr. Michaelis, "Die Conservation des Mannes" and "Der Soldat auf dem Marsche," *Österreichische Militärische Zeitung* 2 (1862), 54-59, 113-115. Quoted in Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 127.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz: Prussia's victory over Austria 1866*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 51.

soldier of at best very mediocre qualities and of weak, but often obstinate character...” The article further stated that the “Austrian army is under the unconditional command of General Benedek, who is an experienced officer who, at least, knows his own mind.”<sup>34</sup> The newspaper’s claims were incommensurate with the actual situation even though it represented the vast majority of newspapers that covered the war. As the Prussians neared the Austro-Saxon positions, no one appeared to understand Benedek’s plan, not even Benedek.

As the Prussians bore down on the Austrians, three smaller scale battles pushed the Austrians back towards Josephstadt; the first of these was the Battle of Mönchengrätz. Mönchengrätz was more of a holding action than a pitched battle that was fought by the defenders in order to buy Clam-Gallas’s forces and the Saxons under Prince Albert time to retreat towards Jicin. Prince Albert’s forces took a detour to avoid the main road which Clam-Gallas’s Austrians clogged on their way to the future battle site. Three Austrian brigades, no small investment, were left behind to slow the Prussian pursuit. The Prussian Crown Prince Friedrich Karl fought a difficult battle against the entrenched Austrian brigades on the high ground around the town. Although his losses were low and he secured the town, Friedrich Karl did not need to take the town. He had desired to fully engage the Iser Army and destroy it before Clam-Gallas and the Saxon Prince Albert could lead it to the relative safety of the North Army’s new camp.<sup>35</sup> However, Friedrich Karl’s fruitless pursuit was the only positive result for the Austrians in the fighting on 27 June through 28 June.

28 June proved to be a momentous day in the war as the Battle of Skalitz changed the situation. Skalitz was the site of a great battle from the Silesian Wars and a natural choke point in Bohemia where the tallest mountains of Central Europe dipped down to the Bohemian plains.

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<sup>34</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 20 June, 1866. Quoted in *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>35</sup> Kessel, *Moltke...* 469-470



Benedek declared that he would not send his troops to assault the heights held by the Prussians under von Steinmetz.<sup>36</sup> Steinmetz greatly desired victory; his aggressive, brittle nature often brought more trouble than victory, however. Steinmetz decided to assault the Austrians in spite of the risk of Benedek turning the majority of his forces to crush the Prussian cockroach. In spite of this reality, Steinmetz's entire force was thrown into the fray in a desperate bid for glory. If Benedek had chosen to commit to destroying Steinmetz, he might have achieved at least some level of victory at Skalitz; instead, he assigned the battle to Archduke Leopold.<sup>37</sup>

Leopold was possibly the worst candidate Benedek could have chosen. The archduke was "fat, sick in the kidneys, half blind, and despised by his men" and more importantly, he had never been in combat before 28 June.<sup>38</sup> Leopold's leadership snapped the cohesion of his forces. Without any word from his erstwhile commander, General Fragnern attempted to stop Steinmetz's assault with a traditional Austrian charge. His bands sounded the assault and he led his men into battle. However, within a mere thirty minutes, Fragnern was dead and his brigade scattered before the Prussian onslaught. General Kreyssern, meanwhile, felt compelled to do something, so he assaulted the Prussians. He too was defeated, killed, and his forces scattered before the rifle fire of the emboldened Prussians. The Austrians suffered thousands of casualties within a few short hours. It took the Austrian archduke a couple hours after the deaths of his generals to discern the fate that was about to befall his forces. He belatedly retreated before the fury of Steinmetz's attack.<sup>39</sup>

The Battle of Skalitz fundamentally altered Benedek's operational direction. Whereas Benedek had planned the destruction of the majority of the Prussian forces under his personal

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<sup>36</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 167.

<sup>37</sup> Kessel, *Moltke...* 470.

<sup>38</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 169.

<sup>39</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 170-174.

direction in a grand Napoleonic battle at Jicin; after Skalice, he relegated the struggle at Jicin to a minor battle under Clam-Gallas and the Saxon Prince Albert. In turn, the Battle of Jicin was a failure that routed the Austro-Saxon forces before the Prussians and set the stage for a major battle at Königgrätz. Benedek himself wired Kaiser Franz Joseph that the “debacle of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps and the Saxon Army obliges me to retire in the direction of Königgrätz.”<sup>40</sup>

On 29 June, Moltke wired his army commanders urging the utmost speed. Moltke believed he personally needed to gain control of his willful army commanders to take advantage of the situation. The situation was ripe for Prussian action, as the allies of Austria crumbled in the West with the surrender of King George V of Hanover and the Italian forces were fought to a standstill at Custoza by the Austrian General Albrecht. However, Albrecht was unwilling to destroy the Italians facing him, and after the opportunity had passed, became thoroughly unable to reinforce the Austrian force in the north. Benedek would be unable to receive reinforcements from any direction; the Austro-Saxon force facing the Prussians was entirely on its own on a field that they had not chosen.

Benedek’s own staff debated the choice to place the army at Königgrätz. It was a position that was horribly outdated, with 18th Century weapons in mind. Benedek’s new operations chief thought the position was a peculiar one. He believed that Benedek had selected a position “far more easily compassed from without than from within” which would give an advantage to the attacking Prussians rather than the defending Austrians.<sup>41</sup> The situation itself was far too chaotic for the Austrians or at least for Benedek to conceive of a major battle at his current position. He may have hoped to gain control of his own forces at a centralized location before sallying out to defeat the enemy.

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<sup>40</sup> Quintin Barry, *The Road to Königgrätz*, (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2009), 286.

<sup>41</sup> Gustav Treuenfest, *Geschichte des k.u.k. Infanterie-Regimentes Nr. 46 FZM Fèjervèry*, (Vienna: Verlag des Regiments, 1890), 448-450.

Whatever his intentions, Benedek had condemned the North Army to fight for its life at Königgrätz. The position possessed a chain of hills rising from the small Bistritz River with the Chlum heights dominating the field approximately eight miles northwest of Königgrätz. At the foothills running parallel to the river several villages were separated by thick entangled woods, the largest of these woods being Swiepwald and Holawald. Benedek did prepare the positions of his troops with the ax and spade by preparing a “system of trenches and field works” and cut down trees in open areas to hamper any assault on the Austrian position.<sup>42</sup> Although his position was rightly criticized after the battle, Benedek made some efforts to hold his position and even attempted to lay the foundation for future victory.

The Prussians remained uncertain about the location and intentions of the Austrians. Chancellor Bismarck, fully clad in his Landwehr major’s uniform, inquired about the size of the force before them and Moltke responded by stating that “We don’t know exactly. It’s at least three corps, perhaps the whole Austrian army.”<sup>43</sup> If the entire Austrian army was situated at Königgrätz, then the vast River Elbe was flowing behind them. Why the Austrians had not retired behind the mighty river to the series of forts guarding northern Austria was a complete mystery to the Prussians. But, Moltke and the entire Prussian leadership were certain of one primary fact; the Austrians could not be allowed to escape behind the Elbe River.

Moltke quickly drew up plans for the battle that would be fought on the move, as most of his forces had not arrived at the battlefield. Moltke began the battle as any master conductor would, with a dramatic opening. With a metaphorical flick of his conductor’s wand, he ordered his artillery forward and began the largest artillery duel the continent had seen; by 8:30a.m. the greatest battle since the Battle of Nations at Leipzig in 1813 began with a thunderous start. A

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<sup>42</sup> Craig, *Battle of Königgrätz...* 88.

<sup>43</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 218.

British war correspondent explained that it happened “as if by the utterance of a magician’s spell, one hundred thousand Prussian warriors springing into sight from the bowels of an armed earth.”<sup>44</sup> The Beethovenian beginning was not all that Moltke had in mind. Although the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was still 20 kilometers away at the beginning of the battle, Moltke was confident that they would be able to arrive on the right flank of Benedek’s position at the correct time to break the Austrian army and possibly encircle them. The battle was to be his masterpiece after years of hard work, long nights, and ridicule by military professionals, in addition to the journalists.

Moltke’s plans did not suit Prince Friedrich Karl who hungered after glory and had routinely ignored Moltke’s plans throughout the campaign. Friedrich Karl greatly desired to have the decisive role in the coming struggle. He tried using his position as a Prince of Prussia to decide his army’s role and when that failed, he worked with his chief of staff to create a plan to sweep the Austrians off of the high ground before the Crown Prince’s arrival on the battlefield. His hopes were not the only ones that challenged Moltke’s plan, Benedek himself hoped to smash Friedrich Karl’s army before the footsore 2<sup>nd</sup> Army had time to arrive on the field.<sup>45</sup>

Friedrich Karl’s assault began well but quickly stalled in the face of such difficult circumstances. One of the prince’s divisions, 3<sup>rd</sup> Division led by General August Werder, waded with his Pomeranians across the Bistriz River and smashed the Austrian brigade that had been detached from the hills to hold the river. The brigade was largely constructed of Venetians who found no motivation to hold the river against the motivated Pomeranians. As they fled, one of Werder’s regiments pursued them with their usual vigor only to be stopped in their tracks by Austrian cannonade. As Werder’s advance halted, to his left the Prussian 4<sup>th</sup> Division was stopped in the woods when their outdated artillery was shattered by the rifled artillery of the

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<sup>44</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 218.

<sup>45</sup> Kessel, *Moltke...* 471-476/

Austrians.<sup>46</sup> The attacks had been successful from Moltke's perspective, since the troops had achieved the seizure of the Bistritz line before 10 a.m. However, Friedrich Karl's personal goal of shattering the Austrian center had failed as certainly as Pickett's Charge had failed three years before, albeit with significantly lower casualties.

The Austrians reacted to the sounds of the guns with a fervor that would have gladdened Radetzky, but only infuriated Benedek. The Austrian commander, noting Friedrich Karl's movements, had sent troops, such as the Prohaska Brigade, immediately forward into the jaws of the Prussian advance to indefensible positions. The brigade's commander further erred by sending another brigade to cover the eventual retreat by Prohaska. Benedek, arriving late on the scene due to his own struggles with Vienna, quickly pulled both brigades out of combat back to their original positions. While he dealt with the Prohaska problem, another general raced into the heat of combat to be the next Radetzky.<sup>47</sup>

Count Festetics was the quintessential Hungarian dragoon and he reacted to the sounds of the guns predictably. To Festetics the Prussian 7<sup>th</sup> Division appeared to be the left wing of Moltke's entire army, but more importantly, they were the closest enemies he could pounce upon. Benedek had made General Mollinary Festetics second-in-command in order to prevent any overly aggressive moves by the rowdy Hungarian. However, Mollinary and Festetics both believed that they had found the left wing of the Prussian force. They decided to take advantage of the supposed Prussian mistake. Festetics's IV Corps, II Corps, and Taxis's light cavalry division charged out of their positions into the maw of the Prussian advance.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 219.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 220.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 221-222.

Although his decision seemed to be half-witted, the foundation for Festetics's move was not only due to personal aggressiveness, but the Feldzeugmeister's failure to secure the Svib forest which provided perfect cover for Prussian forces advancing from the north or the west. Festetics's second-in-command, Anton Mollinary was "a senior staff officer with a fine eye for terrain" who recognized the importance of the thick forest.<sup>49</sup> By 8:30 A.M. Festetics galloped at the head of his corps to secure the village of Masloved where there were enough clearings to place his guns and possibly win the battle for Benedek.

The Prussians, who encountered the unwieldy Austrian formations in the forest, assumed that the Austrian army had withdrawn across the river and the Austrian brigades they had stumbled across were actually rearguard forces. As the two forces crashed into each other, the flexible small unit tactics of the Prussians, which emphasized platoon and even sections of riflemen as the primary tactical mass, crushed the Austrians. The half-battalion was the tactical mass used by the Austrians who struggled to maneuver within the tangled forest.<sup>50</sup> But the Prussian success, like that of Friedrich Karl's other units, was short lived.

The Prussians ran headlong into the advancing Austrian forces and the Appiano Brigade whose original goal was to cover the Prohaska brigade's retreat. Nearly enveloped by Festetics's surprised Austrian IV Corps, the Prussian regimental commander, Franz von Zychlinksi, retreated with his panic-stricken forces under the *Schnell-feuer* (quick fire) of his two rear battalions who pushed back the Austrian forces long enough to find cover in the Svib Forest. As the Prussians committed more forces to the ebbing attack, the ethnic diversity of the Austrian forces worked against them once again.

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<sup>49</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 222.

<sup>50</sup> Fontane, *Der deutsche Krieg*, Vol. 1... 522-531.

In spite of the fact that the Austrians had the advantage, thanks to the Prussians overextending themselves, the Austrians struggled to take advantage of it. The Hungarians of Fleischhacker's 61<sup>st</sup> Regiment refused to attack as ordered at 9:30 a.m. As he struggled to master the situation, Festetics's second-in-command, Mollinary, resorted to underhanded tricks to force his men to obey their orders. He ordered the ethnic Magyar hussar units into the woods to certain slaughter. Only after seeing their brethren cut down without support did the Hungarian troops agree to attack as ordered. Festetics found himself, not leading the attacks in the woods, but lying upon the bloody ground at Masloved missing a foot due to a Prussian shell. The Hungarians suffered similarly in the woods as the Prussians with their Dreyse Rifles and flexible tactics pounded their regiment. Mollinary attempted to do as he had been trained, he acted upon the operational information furnished to him by Benedek and attempted to seize the Svib Forest to hammer the flank of Friedrich Karl. In spite of ambushes and stiff Prussian resistance, Mollinary blasted the Prussians, eventually driving Fransecki's forces from the woods entirely.<sup>51</sup>

Mollinary's offensive created the pivotal moment of the battle for the Austrians. Prussian King Wilhelm insisted upon reinforcing Fransecki's forces in the woods, but Moltke recognized that Mollinary had altered the situation. Prince Friedrich Karl feared that his chances for glory were fading and petitioned the king to release the Prussian reserve to bolster his assault. The Austrians were in the perfect position to counterattack the numerically weaker positions, thus, Moltke held two full Prussian divisions in reserve against this possibility and struggled to maintain control of the fluid situation.<sup>52</sup> Fortunately for Moltke, who struggled against Prince Friedrich Karl's bid for glory throughout the dangerous moments of the battle, Benedek failed to launch any sort of counterattack against the Prussian forces clinging to the left bank of the

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<sup>51</sup> Fontane, *Der deutsche Krieg*, Vol. 1... 532.

<sup>52</sup> Grosser Generalstab, *Feldzug 1866*, 343. Quoted in Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 226.

Bistriz. Moltke firmly grasped the importance of the battle, where the Prussians had grabbed the metaphorical wolf by the ears and did not dare to let him loose. As the Prussian casualties mounted under heavy bombardment from the Austrian artillery without any artillery support of their own throughout the late morning, Moltke firmly told the king that “Here there will be no retreat. Here we are fighting for the very existence of Prussia.”<sup>53</sup>

Ironically, Moltke’s first great victory seemed to be shaping up as a Kesselschlacht, an encirclement battle, but one around his own forces on the left bank of the Bistriz. He was even considering committing his reserves to extricate Fransecki, Horn, and Werder from the possible Kessel, or cauldron, that Mollinary had taken the first step towards constructing with his seizure of the Svib Forest. It was at this time when the Prussian Crown Prince arrived ahead of his forces and surveyed the disheartening scene. The Crown Prince ordered his commanders not to march to the sounds of the guns in order to perform their part of the battle. The last thing the Prussians needed was to have the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army join Friedrich Karl’s forces under the heavy fire of the Austrian artillery.

Although the battle at the center of the Austrian lines had developed well for the Austrians in spite of Benedek’s derisive leadership, at 1 P.M. both flanks would begin to ruin the battle for him in spite of his vast two to one numerical advantage (240,000 to 135,000). On the Austrian left flank the Saxons, having perceived the grave importance of their role in the coming battle, had spent the night of 2 July preparing a secondary position at the next village with high ground upon the flank of the Austrian position.<sup>54</sup> The Saxons retreated from Hradek only to stop their pursuers by stoutly defending the village of Problus. However, as the battle wore on, the Saxon Crown Prince Albert decided it was imperative to retake the high ground of Hradek. The

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<sup>53</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 233.

<sup>54</sup> *The Contribution of the Royal Saxon Army Corps to the campaign of 1866 in Austria*, trans. ed. Stuart Sutherland, (Toronto: Iser Publications, 2001), 60.



Prussian artillery continued to arrive and hammer the Saxons who bravely held their positions thanks to the road that ran from Hradek to the Prussian lines. The Saxon Crown Prince had recognized on 2 July that the higher ground around Hradek provided the defender excellent artillery positions that he intended to hold.<sup>55</sup>

The Saxons resumed their offensive once again trying to seize more hilly ground near Hradek only to be hit in the flank by the Prussian 30<sup>th</sup> Brigade under Canstein. His assault in the Prim Forest hit Prince Albert's Saxons on both flanks, showering them with rifle fire and artillery fire from the Elbe Army's artillery pieces at Hradek. The Saxons stubbornly held out against the assault in spite of the overwhelming firepower of the Prussian troops. But within a half of an hour, the Prussians had broken a gaping hole in the left flank of the Austrian position by pushing the Saxons off the high ground. The Saxons suffered immense casualties causing a "disorderly retreat" in the general direction of the rear.<sup>56</sup> Crown Prince Albert attempted to organize his troops once again, but this proved futile as the last attack had cost some units as much as a quarter of their strength who laid screaming and dying upon the field of battle.<sup>57</sup>

With the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army on the horizon and success against the Saxons on the left flank, Moltke felt his confidence surge as he ordered reserve artillery ammunition to be fired against the Austrians.<sup>58</sup> On the Austrian right flank, the Prussian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army pummeled the unsuspecting enemy forces. The Austrian forces on the right flank had not been warned that a third of the Prussian armies would appear while they prepared to carry out the expected counteroffensive against Fransecki. The Prussian Guards Corps easily triumphed over their opponents; while the Prussian VI Corps, which had expected stiff Austrian resistance as they crossed the chest-high

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 67-68.

<sup>58</sup> Fontane, *Der deutsche Krieg 1866*, Vol. 1... 548.

Trotinka River, swept the units opposing them from the field. The mere arrival of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, it appeared, was enough to defeat the Austrian forces.

For Benedek the moment was dire; his right flank had halted, his left flank had been mangled, and the morale of his troops quickly eroded around him. He finally resolved to attack in spite of his unwillingness to do so when his men had nearly fractured the Prussian lines. In spite of his new found aggression, he vacillated even longer until the screams of shells and the fires of Chlum brought him to decide against an all out offensive against the Prussian center to escape the forming pocket. He failed to inform his junior commanders of the situation or of the seriousness of their predicament. The Austrians, who had maintained the momentum throughout the day, suddenly found themselves losing as the day slipped away from them.

For the men with the Austrian center, the crème of the Prussian crop of soldiers seemed to have “materialized as if from thin air.”<sup>59</sup> The Prussian assault completely demoralized the exhausted Austrian forces. As Prussian Uhlans with couched spears galloped onto the summit of Chlum, many of the Austrian troops reached the “wrong side of enough,” many of whom disbanded and fled to the Elbe.<sup>60</sup> While Benedek had attempted to solve the problems on his left flank, the right flank collapsed entirely. He found a regiment of Hungarians whom he sent charging towards the heights of Chlum urging them with calls of “Ellöre!” or “Forwards!”<sup>61</sup> As he rode off, it was perhaps a short lived blessing for Benedek that he did not know that his fellow Magyars would be slaughtered or surrender within minutes.

The Austrian North Army completely collapsed before Benedek’s very eyes. Units disbanded in vast droves, dropping packs, ammunition, and even their rifles in stacks as they fled

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<sup>59</sup> Wawro, *Austro-Prussian War...* 251.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 251-252.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

from the debacle. The Austrians could have suffered total defeat, but the Prussians proved unprepared to even attempt to encircle the fleeing Austrian forces. The Prussian cavalry were still to be used in the old style and were even ordered to run down the retreating Austrians. Instead, most of them never even fought in combat, but were caught in traffic jams behind the lines. The artillery was still weak and had failed to make an impact on the battle until the afternoon and then only on the left flank. Benedek's surviving forces escaped, nearly miraculously as the Prussian forces crushed his army.

For Moltke, however, the victory itself was enough. He had broken the Austrian army and destroyed its will to fight. Moltke in his victory at Königgrätz had secured strategic victory over the Austrians and it proved to be the final victory needed to defeat the Austrians. In all, the Prussians had meted out a devastating punishment to the Austro-Saxon forces killing or wounding 24,000 and capturing another 20,000 or more troops. The price the Prussians paid for their victory was meager by comparison losing only 9,000 killed or wounded.<sup>62</sup>

The Austrians and Bavarians agreed to pay heavy indemnities while Hannover, Schleswig-Holstein, Hesse-Kassel, Nassau, and Frankfurt were outright annexed and the rest of the states who would be included in the future German Empire were indirectly controlled by Berlin. The peace treaty prepared Prussia for another war by giving them more troops and allies.<sup>63</sup>

Prussia, in future wars, would be aided by former enemies, some of whom proved just as brave and skillful as they had in 1866, such as the Saxons. Bismarck attempted to extricate King Wilhelm from Bohemia without territorial demands. The king, who had quivered at the very thought of war, became aggressive after the war had been won. Bismarck needed to leave the

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 274.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 275-277.

Austrians defeated without the eagerness for another war that Frederick the Great had faced after his seizure of Silesia. While Bismarck argued with the king, Moltke had already begun his further plans for reforming, rearming, and leading his Prusso-German forces in future wars.

Moltke enlarged the general staff and continued to reform the Prussian army to prepare it for the challenges ahead. The Prussian army that fought the Franco-Prussian War was almost 300 percent larger than the army that fought the war in 1866.<sup>64</sup> The Railroad Section of the Greater General Staff took over the science of mobilization and worked tirelessly from 1866 to 1870 to speed mobilization. They also worked to organize mobilization to meet the requirements of industrialized warfare. Moltke possessed an undeniable eye for military talent; many of the men he entrusted with reforming the Prussian Army changed the path of history as the conflict with France neared ignition.

The Prussian artillery desperately needed reforms and new equipment. They had been outgunned and outranged by the rifled guns of the Austrian artillerists in 1866.<sup>65</sup> They had failed to be a principle tool of victory both in Denmark and in Bohemia. Moltke relied primarily upon two artillery officers who desperately wanted to solve the problems of the artillery. They reformed the tactics of the troops and the Minister of War von Roon haggled to get new equipment for the men.

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<sup>64</sup> Bucholz, *Moltke and the German Wars*... 146.

<sup>65</sup> Dennis Showalter, "Prussian Technology and War: artillery from 1815 to 1914" in Ronald Haycock and Keith Neilson, *Men, Machines, and War*, (Waterloo, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1988), 125.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR

Moltke understood that in spite of Prussia's victories, the kingdom's position would still be precarious in the event of war with France. Although Austria and Denmark had been defeated, they had not been crushed. They could still prove difficult foes if Prussia's army was invested in a war against France. Moltke also viewed Romanov Russia as another possible foe. Although Russia viewed Prussia more favorably than France or Austria, Moltke felt that friendliness could not be relied upon from the authoritarian Russian Empire.

Moltke planned to carefully take on the 2<sup>nd</sup> French Empire, viewing them as the most dangerous foes in Europe. He recognized that the barely disguised disgust that his commanders treated him with could not be tolerated in future wars. Although he could not dispose of generals like von Steinmetz or Prince Friedrich Karl, Moltke believed the influence he earned at the Battle of Königgrätz could better control them. Moltke continued to allow his commanders tactical freedom; however, he exerted increased control on the operations of the Franco-Prussian War than he had been willing or able to in 1866.

The first days of the Franco-Prussian War caught most of Europe by surprise. Moltke had produced a mobilization plan that enabled the Prussians to smoothly and swiftly move their forces to the Franco-Prussian border. Moltke did not possess a master plan to encircle the French. His plans for the war itself were general in the extreme, following his mantra that "no plan survives the first contact with the enemy." In spite of the later claims of the myth of Sedan, Moltke never firmly planned for encirclements and battles of annihilation.

Moltke benefitted from the blatant aggression of Napoleon III who alienated the southern German states and even Franz Joseph of Austria. Napoleon decided that he had made a grave

mistake by allowing Bismarck to deal with the Austrians without squeezing some firm promise of territory from him. The Prusso-Germans believed that they were attacked by the French without any provocation. How could a distant relative of the Prussian king sitting upon the decrepit Spanish throne threaten France, the German peoples asked themselves?

Fortunately for Moltke, the French were unprepared for their jingoistic move. Napoleon III throughout the 1860s and 1870s endured painful kidney stones that hampered his ability to ride on horseback during the war. He also proved that he did not possess an ounce of his uncle's war-making talents. Napoleon declared war against the Prussians and by extension all of the members of the German Confederation.

Therefore, the Prussians found themselves in a position that was both strategically and politically sound. The German states, including the more reluctant southern members such as Bavaria, marshaled their forces to meet Imperial France on the field of battle. Memories of the great Napoleon haunted German recollections; even the peasants in western Germany reportedly asked Prussian officers when the French would arrive.<sup>66</sup>

Napoleon III not only divided his forces into two grand armies with one in Metz and the other in Strasbourg; he also divided his commanders. The upstart Bonaparte took command of the Army of the Rhine himself in order to collect the maximum political capital from the conflict. This needless faux pas by the Emperor against several of his most experienced commanders on the eve of a war with one of the Great Powers of Europe was a mistake Napoleon could not afford to make.

He mistreated his star commander, Marshal Achille Bazaine, who had made his name by fighting in the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, and later winning the victory against the

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<sup>66</sup> G. Otto von Bismarck, *Kriegserlebnisse 1866 und 1870-1871*, (Dessau: 1907), 88. Quoted in Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 66.

Austrians in 1859 at Solferino. Napoleon made Bazaine the scapegoat for the French failure in Mexico, a blow that Bazaine reportedly never forgave. Then, in 1870, Napoleon subordinated the experienced leader to Marshal Leboeuf who was far beneath Bazaine both in abilities and on the French generals' seniority list. One French officer noted in his diary that the scorn with which Napoleon treated Bazaine was unbelievable. The officer wrote "it could scarcely have been possible to insult a man more completely."<sup>67</sup>

Napoleon intended to aggressively use forces against the German states before they had a chance to mobilize their forces for the bloodiest struggle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. His action was purely political, striking the lonely 16<sup>th</sup> Division from Prussia that guarded the city of Saarbrücken. This strike was not the beginning of some grand invasion of Prussia aimed at the dissolution of the German Bund. Instead, the operation was a strategic cul-de-sac that could not be turned into anything other than the total destruction of the French army. Nevertheless, Napoleon dragged his Army of the Rhine to Saarbrücken where he engaged the Prussian 16<sup>th</sup> Division. Although the French marksmanship and the French Chassepot Rifle proved to be impressive firepower quantifiers, the operation at the end of July 1870 merely killed a few people in addition to satisfying Parisian public opinion.

The situation looked perfect to Moltke for a chance at a true encirclement. The French could have been enveloped in Alsace and Lorraine if the Prussians had been able to quickly overpower them. In addition, Moltke noted how much cozier the region was in comparison with the much longer distances the Prussians had been forced to cover in 1866. However, just as Moltke had discovered in 1866, reality is a cold mistress. The Chassepot Rifle, personal desire for glory, and the difficulties of fighting a coalition war conspired against Moltke's hopes.

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<sup>67</sup> Charles Fay, *Journal d'un officier de l'Armée du Rhin*, (Paris: 1889), 37-38, quoted in Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 70.

A mere two days after Moltke had assembled his German coalition forces, the Battle of Wissembourg, which set the stage for the much larger Battle of Spicheren, took place. At Wissembourg the Bavarian II Corps was halted by the blistering fire from the entrenched French positions. After a difficult day of combat, the artillery pushed the French back from the town and allowed the infantry to finish taking the town. This small victory proved that the war with France would be more difficult for all of the Germans than it had been in 1866 against the Austrians. Moltke proved once again that his belief in simple overall plans and his desire to shape the situation as it developed would prove paramount in the conflict. Moltke aimed at encircling Napoleon's Army of the Rhine by pinning it in place with the largest army at his disposal, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army under Prince Friedrich Karl and enveloping it with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army under the Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm.

However, once again von Steinmetz acted on his own initiative instead of operating within the confines of his orders. Steinmetz had courted disaster in 1866 only to be saved by luck. In 1870, the general fancied himself the second Blücher and desired increased glory. He refused to listen to orders or reason throughout the German Wars of Unification. Steinmetz moved his sixty thousand troops to engage at least twice that number of Frenchmen armed with the greatest rifle of its day.

As Steinmetz moved his forces forward, he blocked Prince Friedrich Karl's large army and upset Moltke's plan for encirclement. Friedrich Karl had learned his lesson about searching for personal glory in 1866 and he wanted to perform his part in Moltke's masterpieces. Steinmetz's actions infuriated Friedrich Karl. Steinmetz had seized the roads necessary for moving the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army into position to pin the Army of the Rhine. Worse still, he exposed his entire force to potential destruction at the hands of the French. Friedrich Karl exclaimed that



“Steinmetz has fatally compromised my beautiful plans.”<sup>68</sup> Steinmetz’s audaciousness proved contagious to some of his commanders. As Steinmetz’s forces moved forward on 6 August, General Georg von Kameke inconceivably sent two of his brigades against a defended site that was described by Marshal Bazaine as a magnificent position.<sup>69</sup> Kameke did not possess the foggiest of notions of what he faced at Spicheren; Steinmetz’s actions had cut off the cavalry screen that Friedrich Karl used to reconnoiter the enemy positions and strength.

Kameke’s brigades used their impressive Krupp cannons to pound the visible French positions from over 2,000 yards away and advanced under the cover of the artillery fire. However, by one o’clock in the afternoon, the Prussian advanced had been thoroughly stopped and only the resourceful artillerists saved Kameke’s brigades from being swept from the field. Kameke’s brigade commanders were experienced veterans who had led their troops in the vicious Svib Forest in 1866; in 1870 they proved just as resourceful, leading companies in person to try and fulfill their orders. At three P.M. Kameke fed another brigade into the slaughter. As reinforcements arrived, one of the brigade commanders, General François, leapt into action trying to take the heights only to be slain within minutes. The French commander, General Frossard, launched brigade-sized counterattacks against Kameke’s demoralized division, driving them away with the bayonet in true Napoleonic fashion.<sup>70</sup>

General der Infanterie Konstantin von Alvensleben, Kameke’s corps commander, arrived on the horrific scene to personally take control of the situation. He directed skirmish lines forward and quickly retook their old positions. The entirety of Alvensleben’s III Corps artillery obliterated French positions with a blistering fire as the infantry performed a firing advance against the heights. By six P.M. Alvensleben launched his final push and drove Frossard’s forces

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<sup>68</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 110.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

into a general retreat. The tactical advantage held by the French had been negated by the superior tactics employed by the Prussian corps commanders. Alvensleben with help from his neighboring corps commander, General Goeben, secured the heights with their skirmish lines and direct artillery support by seven P.M. on 6 August.<sup>71</sup>

As the Crown Prince's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army moved after Marshal MacMahon's French corps in the aftermath of the Battle of Wissembourg, the Prussian cavalry spotted MacMahon's position. MacMahon had dug into the magnificent position at Froeschwiller and with 50,000 men awaited the German arrival. The Crown Prince, with his Prusso-German forces had nearly 100,000 troops at his disposal and planned to use three columns to fight his own smaller version of Königgrätz at Froeschwiller. At Froeschwiller, MacMahon possessed clear fields of fire overlooking most of the terrain with a forest on his left. In the center of the position was a bowl that further impeded travel with vineyards and a small river.<sup>72</sup>

The battle, like so many others in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, did not begin as precisely as intended. Although the Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm had decided to fight on 7 August, the coalition nature of his army altered his plans. On 6 August, the Baden-Württemberg Corps and the Bavarian II Corps, tired from trudging through the muddy cisterns formerly known as roads that had been created by heavy rains on the night of 5 August, crashed into the French positions.<sup>73</sup>

As the sounds of battle drifted upon the humid air, the Prussian V Corps veered out of its own line of march to join the fray. The commander of the V Corps was none other than General Hugo von Kirchbach, a general from 1866 who had received the highest Prussian medal, the

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<sup>71</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 115-116.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 121-122.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

Pour Le Merite, for his part in Steinmetz's victory at Skalice. Under his command were mostly Poles who were often viewed with various levels of disdain amongst the Prussian command. Kirchbach wandered straight into MacMahon's killing fields. Chassepot fire rained down from nearly invisible positions upon the Prussian forces, creating a terrible slaughter.

Used as primitive machine guns, the French Mitrailleuse, and Chassepot Rifles blasted away at the German forces, and the Prusso-Württemberg-Badenese troops only moved a third of the way up the slopes of Froeschwiller by noon. Some of the Bavarian commanders repeatedly refused orders to move their units into the attack; even once they did attack, the Bavarian troops splintered as the French hammered blow after blow upon the light blue clad troops. The Prussian XI Corps, comprised mostly of Saxons, also found themselves stopped mid-stride by the powerful French rifle fire. By midday, Friedrich Wilhelm and his chief of staff General Blumenthal had made their way through the tangled traffic jams on the road to the battlefield. Once again, superior commanders moved the powerful new artillery guns into firing positions and blasted gaping holes into the French lines. For the artillerists, with a negative reputation from the Napoleonic Wars and the war in 1866, the battle was a chance to prove their worth.<sup>74</sup>

Already by 1 P.M., the Prussian artillery had devastated the French lines and increasing enemy reinforcements deeply distressed Marshal MacMahon. The Prussians already outnumbered the French by more than 30,000 troops as the artillery annihilated soldier after soldier. MacMahon unleashed his ultimate French weapon, the cuirassier, which had been one of Napoleon's favorite keys to victory in the early 1800s. The armored horsemen with their plumed helmets and with their effulgent breastplates charged towards the Prusso-Saxon forces on the flank of the French position. The grand cavalry charge reflected the élan of an older age, mounted

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 124.

soldiers armed with sword and adorned with resplendent armor galloped directly towards their German foes.<sup>75</sup>

The troops of the XI Corps, armed with the Dreyse needle gun, rained down quick fire onto the racing cavalry, drowning the charge and shattering French chances for victory. The XI Corps reformed and took the heights from the stubborn French troops. The Prusso-German troops in the center took advantage of the relief provided by XI Corps and quickly advanced in spite of thick fire from the French colonial troops. Bavarian forces emerged from the woods along the left flank of MacMahon's position and frightened 9,000 French troops with thirty guns to surrender.<sup>76</sup> As Friedrich Wilhelm and Blumenthal examined the field of battle in the evening of 6 August, they must have burned inwardly about the unnecessary loss of life incurred by the impromptu assault by Kirchbach and the Bavarians. Although the battle's cost was much higher than it needed to be, the German forces achieved their goal to separate MacMahon's army from Napoleon III's Army of the Rhine. Friedrich Wilhelm did not exaggerate when he wrote in his diary that he had "completely defeated Marshal MacMahon, putting his troops to utter and disorderly retreat".<sup>77</sup> He had set the stage for total victory over Imperial France by breaking the back of MacMahon's force. The French retreated before the fury of the struggle, only briefly fighting an irresolute battle on 14 August.

Finally, ten days after Spicheren and Froeschwiller, on 16 August, the Prussians forced the French to fight once again at the Battle of Mars-La-Tour. Moltke feared that Marshal Bazaine would retreat to link with MacMahon's survivors or the reserve army forming at Châlons. Alvensleben, pursuing with his III Corps, believed that the Army of the Rhine would continue to retreat. Therefore, he attacked immediately at 5 A.M. on 16 August with his 5<sup>th</sup> Division while

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 133-135.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 137.

he ordered the 6<sup>th</sup> Division to quickly march up the road to Mars-La-Tour and the corps artillery to move into position with all haste. Ferdinand von Stüpnagel's 5<sup>th</sup> Division's Brandenburgers were stopped by heavy fire from French infantry. However, by 11 A.M., Alvensleben had finished gathering ninety guns to send the French positions and troops to kingdom come. His artillery pounded the French infantry into the ground while the French leadership clung to the idea of safety.

Alvensleben's corps was supremely vulnerable throughout the day's actions as he was outnumbered and hours away from reinforcements at the height of the battle in the early afternoon. Alvensleben desperately ordered his cavalry to assault the French artillery positions in order to gain fire supremacy over his opponents. Adalbert von Bredow led the cavalry against the teeth of the French heavy weapons and defeated them, chasing the gunners away and relieving the infantry. The attack was called von Bredow's Death Ride and was the German equivalent of the English Charge of the Light Brigade. Success for von Bredow's Death Ride hardly seemed possible as the French Mitrailleuses, Chassepots, and artillery guns fired away onto the modern battlefield. Bredow used terrain to cover his advance, and although he lost slightly more than fifty percent of his forces, he successfully silenced the French fire support and convinced French high command to stay put in Gravelotte.

Alvensleben fought a battle that he should not have won and should not have fought in the first place. Moltke had wanted to keep the French from retreating to Chalons but not at the cost of an entire corps. Nor were the French even traveling to Chalons from the beginning to the end of the day, Bazaine kept his eye fixed on a retreat to Metz. One historian, Geoffrey Wawro, correctly asserted that Mars-La-Tour was a battle that the French should have won.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 152.

Alvensleben's use of von Bredow's cavalry to attack the French mitrailleurs appears to be his own tacit acknowledgement of this fact. In spite of Bazaine's mistakes, only Alvensleben's reliance upon the guns of his entire corps allowed his III Corps to escape with a tactical draw rather than a crushing defeat.

For a third time, Moltke had failed to keep close enough tabs upon his corps commanders, they had failed to act upon the intelligence presented to them, and finally the field commanders failed to operate within the general plan. The commanders also did not use good judgment and continued throughout early August to attack entrenched French forces which possessed a vastly superior infantry rifle. Often, the battles were fought entirely on French terms on ground of their choosing. Rather than a prescient chief of general staff guiding an invasion straight to the great battle of encirclement at Sedan, Moltke struggled to gain any semblance of control over the invasion before the entire offensive derailed.

Moltke did realize the strategic silver lining to the Battle of Mars-La-Tour just as he had with the Battle of Lagensalza. Alvensleben had pushed Bazaine off of the highground. Bazaine had allowed himself to be separated from the road to Chalons and the rest of France by most of the Prusso-German forces. Thankfully for Moltke, Bazaine did not realize that the Prussians were overextended or at least did not possess enough belief in his own government to search for victory.

The Battle of Gravelotte was yet another unintentional battle in August 1870. The Prussians had to move their troops through the battlefield of Mars-La-Tour which was only two days old with corpses still rotting upon the landscape; this was disheartening at best for the troops. Once again, a Prussian corps commander led Moltke into another battle of doubtful strategic value. General von Manstein, who had just lost his son at Spicheren, turned his bleary

eyes and saw the French positions upon the heights and through the tears ordered his forces forward. His corps marched into the sea of French fire only to be pushed back by the crashing waves of rifle fire. Steinmetz, not to be outdone by anyone, ordered August von Goeben's VIII Corps and VII Corps to launch full scale attacks into the sea of death at 3P.M. in spite of orders to hold till a general attack was prepared. Steinmetz once again proved his unwillingness to follow orders or even slightly concern himself with the fate of his men. On the field, the outlook was grim. The later prominent military historian, Sergeant Hans Delbrück, wrote that "terrible bullets have whistled close by... a bullet hit right between us and a second killed a sergeant nearby..." Meanwhile, Delbrück recalled that "[the] French were nowhere to be seen... a great many men fell in this attempt. The run across the field completely disorganized the regiment... Bullets rained over us like hail. With our small numbers an attack on the strongly protected French position was unthinkable."<sup>79</sup> While it was unthinkable to the men thrown into the slaughter, for Steinmetz it was just another day at the helm. He guided his muddy forces straight into the jaws of death in contradiction to reason, patriotism, and his own orders. Goeben's VIII Corps had been transferred from Steinmetz's 1<sup>st</sup> Army to Prince Friedrich Karl's 2<sup>nd</sup> Army to reduce the chances that Steinmetz might pull exactly this stunt.

As the Prussian guns labored to destroy the French positions and relieve the infantry, Moltke was enraged. President Ulysses S. Grant had sent Phillip Sheridan, the cavalry commander from the American Civil War, to observe the Prusso-German command in the Franco-Prussian war. He noted in his journal that Moltke passed the first hours of the battle on his hill behind Gravelotte "walking about, kicking clods of dirt or small stones here and there, his

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<sup>79</sup> Hans Delbrück, *Delbrück's Modern Military History*, Trans. Arden Bucholz, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 45-46.

face pale and thoughtful,” silently fuming over the outrageous acts of insubordination.<sup>80</sup> Helpless in the face of such odious nepotism, Moltke awaited the conclusion of the battle.

Prussian soldiers were slaughtered; they had marched into a position with dizzying layers of crossfire from Chassepot and Mitrailieuse alike. Manstein ordered his artillery too close to the action to support the death march only to have those men massacred as well, the exposed artillerists being gunned down before having a chance to use their powerful tools. The Prussian king even rode near the front to discover what was going on; in his mind any attack that was launched must have a chance for success.

The aged Moltke and the thirty-nine year old Sheridan jogged beside the king’s horse near the front. Moltke, as a soldier himself, needed to convince the king to stop the senseless slaughter of his own men. However, the scene that greeted the two was far from encouraging. Sheridan explained that the king forcibly swore at the soldiers retreating from the open arms of death.<sup>81</sup> King Wilhelm angrily demanded answers from Steinmetz about the retreating soldiers. The General exclaimed, “There are no more leaders, their officers have all been killed or wounded.” The king muttered to himself “They are cowards,” as retreating soldiers jostled his horse. Moltke, now enraged beyond compare, could not contain himself any longer and exploded in defense of his men, “But the men are dying like heroes for your Majesty!” Wilhelm sloughed the defense off by stating that “I alone will be the judge of that.” Moltke, unable to restrain himself any further, raced off without another word.<sup>82</sup>

Before Bazaine could bring himself to take advantage of Steinmetz’s blunder, which was compounded by King Wilhelm’s tacit support, Moltke’s plan came of age. At 3:30 P.M. the

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<sup>80</sup> Philip H. Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of Philip Henry Sheridan: general United States Army*, Vol. 2, ed. Michael V. Sheridan, (New York: Appleton, 1904), 371.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 377.

<sup>82</sup> Waldersee, Vol. I, 89-90, quoted in Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 173.



Saxons, former enemies of the Prussians, had swiftly surmounted the obstacles in the forest and arrived at the right flank of the French position. They combined with the elite of the Prussian military, two full divisions of crack Prussian Guards, to assault the flank. Together the two former foes gathered 180 guns to rain death upon the French right. This was the point at which Moltke had intended to start the battle. The Prusso-Saxon forces artillery thundered angrily, showering the vulnerable French troops with hot shrapnel.<sup>83</sup>

General August von Württemberg, feeling the weight of his small state's history upon his shoulders, raced into action at 5 P.M. to steal the glory from the Saxons and Prussians. His forces were met with disaster as Chassepot fire mixed with unavoidable friendly fire from the Saxons to decimate his forces. Closer to the center of the French position, Württemberg's 25<sup>th</sup> Division, comprised mostly of Hanoverians, was crushed by the might of the obstinate French defenders in an avalanche of fire. Württemberg's corps was cut to ribbons, losing in a little over an hour more than all of the Prussian forces had lost on 3 July, 1866 at Königgrätz.<sup>84</sup> After the Prussian skirmish lines retreated from the withering fire, at 7 P.M. the Saxon guns let loose the hounds of hell upon the stagnant French positions.

The Saxon guns hammered the French flank as many Frenchmen were leaving the line to make dinner, compounding the battering with confusion. Bazaine stayed clear of the battle throughout the day, adding vague and confusing orders that only seemed to worsen the situation that had remained positive throughout the day.<sup>85</sup> He continued to send orders such as, "They are in good positions and must defend them," as well as contradictory orders about guarding the

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<sup>83</sup> Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*... 173.

<sup>84</sup> Paul von Hindenberg, *Aus meinem Leben*, (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1937), 34-37.

<sup>85</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*... 179-180.

escape route to the fortresses of Metz.<sup>86</sup> Bourbaki, the onsite commander, tentatively employed one division from his reserve as the Germans crushed his flank.

Steinmetz tried once again, as the French lines crumbled, to secure glory for himself at the price of his men's lives. King Wilhelm, an old friend of von Steinmetz, handed control of Moltke's last operational reserve to Steinmetz for an attack against the last remaining portion of the French line. Steinmetz ordered the East Prussians of Fransecky's II Corps up the slopes into the open maw of French rifle fire. The air thickened with hot lead and bursting shells fired blindly by the Prussian artillery into the fading light. Panic rarely seized East Prussian troops throughout the course of the German Wars of Unification, however, it clutched at the hearts of the troops who were quickly routed as fire hit them from behind.

As the sun faded slowly from view, many Prussian infantrymen must have sighed gratefully. On a day when the sun seemed to stand still to allow more death and destruction, the slaughter seemed biblical in its proportions. Sheridan noted that in contrast to a victory, this battle seemed to have ended in defeat for the Prussians. Sheridan saw the king slumped on a makeshift seat away from headquarters.<sup>87</sup> The Prussians had lost over 20,000 men killed, wounded, or missing to accomplish almost nothing strategically other than to prove the great cost of King Wilhelm's nepotism. Wilhelm had discouraged Moltke who realized he had no role to play in the chaos of the battle as his authority was undermined by the doltish king. Wilhelm had allowed the colossal carnage and even encouraged it to aid his friend's career. The only thin silver lining was that Moltke finally began to achieve some semblance of control over his own armies.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>87</sup> Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of Philip Henry Sheridan...* 377.

Moltke finally was able to take the actions he had desired to take before the first shot. 150,000 reinforcements arrived to bolster his shaken force and another 300,000 Germans mustered in Prussia. Moltke succeeded at last in removing von Steinmetz from the war on 15 September, sending him to become the military-governor in Posen some 500 miles away. He also reorganized his three unwieldy armies into four in order to take two of them to do battle with MacMahon.<sup>88</sup> He would leave two of the armies to besiege Bazaine, who by retreating despite his success in holding his positions, had cornered himself in the fortresses of Metz where he possessed no forage and very little supply for his hungry army. Prince Friedrich Karl's 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which had lost roughly half of its numbers to the creation of the new army, was to besiege Metz. Friedrich Karl's pride was soothed by the increase in command as Moltke handed the control of Steinmetz's 1<sup>st</sup> Army over to the prince. It was only a matter of time until Bazaine surrendered to Friedrich Karl.

Moltke finally obtained his desired authority; after the nightmarish slaughter at Gravelotte, the king never dared to challenge Moltke's knowledge of war again. Before the march west to fight MacMahon, Moltke entrusted the new Army of the Meuse to the forty-three year old Crown Prince Albert of Saxony with 120,000 troops of the Prussian Guards Corps, IV Corps, XII Corps, and two cavalry divisions for reconnaissance. Accompanying him, the Prussian Crown Prince with his 180,000 troops marched forth to hunt down MacMahon. It was after this point, with Moltke firmly at the helm of his mighty force and Imperial France beyond her prime, that the myth of Sedan began to take shape.

MacMahon, ordered away from the safety of Paris to aid Bazaine, was forced to wheel his hungry army north to Sedan to gather provisions with rain slowing his every step. The

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<sup>88</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 181.

problem for the Prussians was that the move seemed improbable. One Saxon colonel declared that to discern the French movements and to take advantage of them showed the “veritable clairvoyance” of Moltke.<sup>89</sup> The Bavarian Prince Leopold, certainly not a disciple of the Prussian, wrote in his journal that “only Moltke’s penetrating eyes could settle the uncertain future into a concrete plan.”<sup>90</sup> Two days later, Moltke obtained the proof he needed to justify his actions as his men trudged through the rain on the chalky roads in Champagne. His cavalry had been scattered to capture enemy troops and ascertain the intentions of the enemy. They exceeded his expectations on 28 August by capturing the entire order of battle and march tables for MacMahon’s army.<sup>91</sup>

In a swift battle that must have reminded Sheridan of the horrors of Chancellorsville, the Bavarian I Corps and Prussian IV Corps opened fire upon the unsuspecting Army of Chalons at Beaumont. French troops had been enjoying breakfast or resting from their hard march only to be interrupted by the harsh screech of falling artillery shells. Advancing Bavarian and Prussian infantry drove the disorganized French troops before them like frightened cattle, unable to take advantage of tactical spacing or the power of their rifles. The Germans captured almost 2,000 prisoners and a wealth of war material in the speedy attack. Moltke, watching from his command post, realized how thoroughly he had outmaneuvered the hapless MacMahon as his muddy infantrymen drove the French before them.

Moltke began his operational envelopment or *Umgehung* of the French Army of Chalons on 31 August by extending the Army of the Meuse to cut off all avenues of retreat for MacMahon’s luckless army. Fickle fate, it seemed, had fully favored Moltke and his plans. On

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<sup>89</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 203.

<sup>90</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War...* 202.

<sup>91</sup> Alfred von Waldersee, *Denkwürdigkeiten des General-Feldmarschalls Alfred Grafen von Waldersee*, vol. I, (Berlin: Verlag-Deutscher Anstalt, 1922), 91.

the night of 31 August, Moltke calmly reassured his king that “we have them in a mousetrap” from whence there could be no escape.<sup>92</sup> On 1 September, the French had placed themselves firmly within the witch’s cauldron at Sedan. MacMahon’s actions were inexplicable, mere days before he had written that “the Prussian system consists of concentrating forces to maneuver decisively in great masses,” yet, now he was placing his army where the “Prussian system” could be used to its fullest advantage.<sup>93</sup> Unlike Bazaine, MacMahon did not even concern himself with possible lines of retreat.

As Prusso-German artillery formed to devastate the French positions, Moltke knew that the battle’s fate had already been decided by French mistakes. General Ducrot famously protested against the hideous position by stating that at Sedan “we are in a chamber pot, about to be shitted upon.”<sup>94</sup> The French committed a series of mistakes that led them to the Battle of Sedan. While they could have used the superiority of their infantry weapons and their supremacy over the terrain the battles would be fought over, instead they voluntarily put themselves in position to be encircled. Unlike the myth that stated that Moltke had intentionally driven the French to Sedan to destroy them, Moltke merely had the good sense and the chess master’s instinct to exploit the blunders of his opponent.

Feeling the tremendous weight of history, the I Bavarian Corps commander, General Ludwig von der Tann, launched yet another bid for redemption. The commander remembered the pathetic performances of Bavarians in 1866 and at Froeschwiller. Although his orders were to keep the French hemmed in on the outskirts of Sedan, he ordered his troops to attack. He felt

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<sup>92</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*... 212.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 213.

that the Bavarians needed to shore up their own pride for future generations while the Prussians and Saxons were too busy to launch coordinated assaults.<sup>95</sup>

Weary Bavarian infantry battled the French soldiers at two little hamlets, Bazeilles and La Moncelle, on the outskirts of Sedan, from house to house in a scene that was more befitting a battle from the Second World War than the German Wars of Unification. Bavarian troops stabbed, clubbed, and shot their way through the town against an unyielding French defense. The most important feature of the fight was the inconclusive and unnecessary nature of the bloodshed. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Army chief of staff, Albrecht von Blumenthal, later exclaimed that he never could have ordered the attack because “it would have been folly.”<sup>96</sup> Blumenthal felt confident as he surveyed the scene through his telescope, declaring that it was “unmistakably evident” that they would win the battle.<sup>97</sup> Prussian shells clobbered the French positions, even lacerating MacMahon’s leg and passing command to General Ducrot.

Even as the German artillery thundered and crashed, sending shells amongst the helpless French soldiers, the German infantry still had to advance to finish the battle. The Prussian assaults were aided by the total fire supremacy of the all-steel, breech-loading Krupp artillery weapons. In some cases, Prussian infantry took trenches only filled with dismembered enemy soldiers, killed by the mighty storm of the artillery barrage.<sup>98</sup> The artillery bombardment was massive, dwarfing anything before it. At noon on 1 September, the Prussian Guards and the Saxons amassed 222 guns to annihilate the French positions opposite them. The German artillery made death rain upon the battlefield, lacerating the cohesion of the French ranks. Upon a single sector the Germans employed the greatest artillery of its day in numbers that matched all of the

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 212-213.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 213.

<sup>97</sup> Albrecht graf von Blumenthal, *Journals of Field-Marshal Count von Blumenthal* ... 111.

<sup>98</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*... 213.

Confederate guns at the Battle of Fredericksburg which had been fought eight years earlier. In response Ducrot ordered two infantry corps to attack the positions. These men promptly were slaughtered and the survivors suffered a horrifyingly bloody rout.

The Prusso-Saxon infantry determined to wring every advantage out of the situation, and in spite of their sympathy for the French predicament, chased forward seizing the French positions and pouring fire upon the routing troops. French brigades began dissolving in their entirety surrendering or fleeing in complete disregard for whatever duty a maddened officer might demand. They may not have been bleating, but the infantry refused to be treated like sheep any longer in the light of the horrors they faced. Hell, itself, seemed to have risen up to swallow the Army of Châlons in a mighty conflagration.

Napoleon and his generals surrendered rather than prolong the devastating nightmare. The encirclement had not been the result of some master plan by Moltke or the culmination of a German way of war. Instead, the victory at Sedan proved Moltke's operational abilities and his ability to take advantage of his opponent's mistakes. The victory's scope was vast and its effects reverberated throughout Europe. The professional army of France was laid low before Moltke's feet. The French suffered four times as many casualties as the Germans in spite of the Bavarian mistakes. Mortal combat decided the fate of MacMahon's Army of Châlons and moved the Germans one step closer to complete unification. King Wilhelm would have a victory song written to commemorate the battle and create the future German holiday of Sedan Day to commemorate the victory.

## CHAPTER 4

### DELBRÜCK AND SCHLIEFFEN

The German Empire, founded by Bismarck's intrigues and secured by the blood of the Prusso-German peoples, did not possess a singular culture. The Germans recognized that they needed a *Kulturnation*, or a nation bound by culture and language. Within the borders of the newest great power of Europe, the natives, as it has been said, grew restless. The German people had no way of identifying the Germans from Austrians, Siebenburgers, Luxemburgers, or even the Swiss who lived outside of the Reich's borders; nor did they possess any reason beyond the spoils of war to explain the inclusion of Alsace-Lorraine-into their borders.

The perceived cultural vulnerability of the Reich led two men to engage in a culture war to determine the identity of the German people. History, not swords or pistols at ten paces, was the weapon of choice for Alfred Graf von Schlieffen and Hans Delbrück. Delbrück and Schlieffen wrote their historical works in order to promote their own view of history. Their struggle decided much more than the fate of German war planning. It also determined the fate of academic history in the German Kaiserreich.

Modern day historians frequently dismiss the ensuing culture war as the *Strategiestreit* or the Strategy Conflict, where theorists argued about strategy without any true effect on society. Both Arden Bucholz and Sven Lange explain Schlieffen's and Delbrück's works in this manner.<sup>99</sup> Another, Robert T. Foley, argued that Schlieffen "transformed what had been largely a historical debate into one about the nature of strategy." However, Schlieffen enjoyed uninhibited power within the military and did not ever truly feel threatened by any of his opponents within

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<sup>99</sup> Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning*, (New York: Berg Publishing, 1991), 122-340; Sven Lange, *Hans Delbrück und der Strategiestreit. Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914*, (Freiberg im Breisgau: Robbach, 1995), passim.



the military establishment. In addition, Delbrück only felt compelled to critique German military strategy after the outbreak of the First World War, when he had finished writing his historical works.

The German leadership built a massive column in order to visibly remind the Germans about the great victory they believed had founded their empire. The Kaiser dedicated the Berlin Victory Column two years after the battle on 2 September 1873. Towering over two hundred feet into the Berlin sky, the column was not always intended to celebrate the Franco-Prussian War; instead, it was originally designed to celebrate the 1864 war against the Danes. It was put on hold during the Austro-Prussian War of 1866. The Prussians needed to halt construction yet again with the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. However, the Victory Column was no longer dedicated to just any victory from the Wars of German Unification. Instead, the Kaiser dedicated the column to the premier victory of German history. It was meant to be the enormous physical symbol of the historical claim that many believed would unite the Germans socially for all time.

Before Schlieffen ever published his first historical accounts to dogmatize the myth of Sedan, German society in general accepted the myth in more general terms. The Germans celebrated *Sedantag* beyond any other holiday in the Kaiserreich. At the celebrations, green wreaths crowned the heads of the townsfolk to symbolize victory wreaths. Even frugal town authorities and teachers dug into their shallow pockets in order to fully participate in the events. Flags were stored throughout the year in order to be displayed on 2 September each year. University students carried flags and marched in the parade singing their songs.<sup>100</sup> Children remembered singing patriotic anti-French songs through the streets until the annual parade. Not

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<sup>100</sup> Verein Deutscher Studenten, *Jahre Verein Deutscher Studenten zu Leipzig, 1881-1931*, (Leipzig: Verlag des A.H.-Bundes, 1931), 46-49.

only did the naturally patriotic citizens, veterans and members of rifle associations, join into the festivities, but the students as well as average people eagerly embraced the celebration.<sup>101</sup> The military also wanted to promote the myth of Sedan among the cadets entrusted to them.

The Royal Prussian Cadet Corps engaged with the myth of Sedan in an even more tangible way than the general populace. The *Sedantag* involved promotions of some cadets to *Unteroffizier* and others from one class to a higher one.<sup>102</sup> The cadets engaged in a celebratory parade after the promotions to close the morning's festivities. In the afternoon, the cadets demonstrated their physical prowess in popular games and competitions. The cadets closed the evening with a military ball and a prolific display of fireworks.<sup>103</sup> The Cadet Corps administration impressed upon their students the importance of the victory at Sedan and the support for their actions came directly from Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, the German Chief of General Staff. Sedan was cemented into the minds of the people of the new German Reich before it became dogmatized by the general staff.

Schlieffen used his position as the Chief of the Greater General Staff of the German Reich in order to cement his mythology of Sedan into the minds of the brightest officers of the next generation in order to wage a complete culture war against those who dared to oppose him. In his critiques of *Generalstabreisen* (General Staff Rides), his treatment of officers who dared to oppose him, and his lectures as well as his speeches, Schlieffen left no room for doubt about the proper myth for the new German nation. Schlieffen intentionally used the tactical-strategic

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<sup>101</sup> Jens Flemming, Saul Klaus, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871-1914*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 61.

<sup>102</sup> John Moncure, *Forging the King's Sword: military education between tradition and modernization, the case of the Royal Prussian Cadet Corps, 1871-1914*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 124-125.

<sup>103</sup> M. Bentstatt-Wahlberg, *Aus den Voranstalten des Kadetten-Corps und der Haupt-Kadettenanstalt zu Lichterfelde*, (Hannover: Helwingsche verlagsbuchhandlung, 1882), 39.

problems and the General Staff rides to indoctrinate the officers in order to take the first step towards a firm historical foundation for the new German society.

Even one of Schlieffen's supporters, Egon Freiherr von Gayl, wrote that these rides and problems "more and more have the character of a study for the Chief himself, rather than for the participants... One was only the instrument of an unspoken higher goal." Another one of Schlieffen's staunchest supporters grudgingly agreed that "It is no lie that Graf Schlieffen usually altered now and then the course of the General Staff rides and *Kriegsspiele* (war games). For him, it was less about the free play of two parties against one another, than the carrying out of a particular operational idea."<sup>104</sup> Schlieffen never swayed from his obsession with encirclement, for him it was less about strategy than it was about the essence of what it meant to be German. Encirclement connected the Germans to Frederick the Great, it gave them a unique heritage that had not been exploited before. It also fit into the martial cultural self-image that Schlieffen and many Germans, having experienced the brief fires of war in the 1860s, desired to possess.

Schlieffen's earlier eastern General Staff rides in 1894 and 1897 included numerous examples of his attempts to indoctrinate the officers of the General Staff with the ideology of encirclement. In Schlieffen's eastern rides one can find a unique look at the intentions of the enigmatic count.<sup>105</sup> The 1894 General Staff ride supposed a daring maneuver by the Russians in the event of a war between Germany and Russia. Schlieffen admitted in his critique that, in most cases, the German forces should retire behind the Vistula River and surrender East Prussia to the Russians.

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<sup>104</sup> Alfred graf von Schlieffen, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*, trans. Robert T. Foley, (New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 2006), 11.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

However, retreat was not what he had in mind with his first General Staff ride in the east. He realized that by retreating, the Germans would allow their Russian foes to unite their separated armies. Instead, he explained that the Germans ought to use the terrain of Masuria in East Prussia with its hundreds of small lakes and rivers to their fullest advantage. Schlieffen explained that, with forced marches, the Germans would be able to focus on the military goal of encirclement. The Russian armies' "annihilation could easily be brought about so long as they continued" in their most likely course.<sup>106</sup> The Germans would be able to destroy one of the Russian armies and stop the other in its tracks. Although the German commander in the ride failed to succeed, Schlieffen used the time to explain modern warfare to his disciples. He wrote that "The reserves in a modern battle (a battle of envelopment) belong on the enveloping wing."<sup>107</sup> What Schlieffen plainly told his officers was that in modern warfare, only battles of envelopment would be successful; this was the entire purpose of his 1894 General Staff ride in the East.

In 1897, the General Staff ride demonstrated onto Schlieffen's favorite scenario where the Germans in the west decisively defeated the French within twenty five days and called upon their eastern army (*Ostheer*) to defeat the million men forces of the Russians. The General Staff ride focused on the importance of the *Feldherr's* (commander-in-chief's) leadership abilities. In order to decisively defeat their opponents, the *Feldherr* needed to be at the correct place at the right time to give the orders that would enable the Germans to win. In the absence of the great commander's presence in the ride, the Germans were unable to decisively defeat the Russians. The *Feldherr* needed to keep his thumb on the metaphorical heartbeat of the campaign and be able to give "a clear picture as to what had happened 100 kilometres distant." Without the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 24.

necessary information the “beaten Russian corps” was allowed “the opportunity and time to reach security.”<sup>108</sup> Although not as obvious as in the other rides, Schlieffen’s ideology clearly needed both a mythological leader and a battle of encirclement of his making in order to tap into the great legacy Schlieffen said the Germans possessed.

The General Staff rides of 1899, 1901, and 1903 in the east give further examples of Schlieffen’s efforts to cement encirclement into the minds of his officers. The 1899 General Staff ride focused on what the Germans would do if they faced the full might of the Russian Empire on the eastern front without the aid of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Schlieffen explained in his critique that in the Franco-Prussian War “we were almost always in the position of being able to keep the French front completely occupied and, at the same time, to envelop one or both of their wings, to threaten the French lines of retreat, and thus to achieve a really decisive result.” Schlieffen further stated that “the strength of our adversaries makes the possibility of such battles in a future war unlikely.”<sup>109</sup>

He explained, however, that this required the Germans to “operate with our smaller army in such a way that we not only attack the enemy’s wings with as much strength as possible, but we must also seriously endanger his lines of retreat, which will become more sensitive due to the great size of the enemy army.” Thus, Schlieffen bared the point of the entire General Staff ride. He wanted to arm his students with a focus upon encirclement of a larger enemy force with a smaller force. Schlieffen concluded that only “in this way can we win a truly decisive result that will bring the campaign quickly to an end, and in a war on two fronts such a rapid campaign is absolutely necessary for us.”<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, 46.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

In 1901, the General Staff ride in the east presumed a quicker and more decisive victory over the French to be possible. Schlieffen assumed that decisive victory over the French could be achieved by the 23<sup>rd</sup> day after mobilization and the *Ostheer* (eastern army) would be reinforced as early as the 35<sup>th</sup> day. To gain perspective, it is useful to note that in 1870, only one major battle had been fought within the first twenty-three days after mobilization and it was a barely recognizable victory for the Germans.<sup>111</sup> For Schlieffen the realm of strategy was inseparable from his cultural uses of history, but he would not allow historical precedent to block his chosen path.

Schlieffen believed that, as Frederick the Great had done in the Seven Years War, Germany needed to focus on defeating one opponent before the others. He explained that the weakness of the *Ostheer* was a necessity for the success of the war. He stated that the “first stroke must be carried out with full strength, and it must result in a truly decisive battle (*ein wirkliche Entscheidungsschlacht*). We have no use for a Solferino; it must result in a Sedan, or at the very least a Königgrätz.”<sup>112</sup> Schlieffen never strayed far from Sedan in his General Staff rides or any other attempt to transform the minds of his countrymen. He concluded the critique with his historical-military thesis. He dramatically claimed that “We must adhere to the principle of advancing by way of envelopment against the enemy’s lines of retreat, for in a war on two fronts we need a *complete victory!*”<sup>113</sup>

As Delbrück’s writings became more numerous and critical of the whole concept of envelopment, Schlieffen’s emphasis on military history in his critiques of the General Staff rides became stronger, such as in the 1903 General Staff ride in the east. The ride’s critique argued that a two front war could not be successfully waged by pushing the enemies of Germany back

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<sup>111</sup> Battle of Woerth/Froeschwiller

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 59.

on this front and then on that front. He based this conclusion on the military history of Germany. In the 1903 ride, as Schlieffen began to realize the necessity for his message to be heard throughout Germany. Before 1903, the count often stated his conclusions as facts without need of justification.

Instead, in his critique of the eastern General Staff ride in 1903, Schlieffen appealed to military history for evidence for his cause. He claimed that “Military history has shown us the means of achieving such an annihilation. Frederick the Great strove for it repeatedly.” Having used one of his primary German examples, Schlieffen then stated that “Napoleon applied it in 1800, 1805, 1806 and 1807 and would have employed it in 1809 if Berthier or, as one can certainly say, his own arrogance had not spoiled it. The Alliance broke Napoleon’s domination in October 1813 in the same way.” By reinterpreting Napoleon’s successful actions as well as his defeat, Schlieffen’s argument continued to build upon itself.

Once every major victory in military history became an attempted encirclement and *Gesamtschlacht*, then he could continue to construct his intellectual fortress from that foundation. He continued by arguing that as Frederick the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the anti-Napoleon Alliance had done before him, so too did the “immortal Field Marshal Graf von Moltke” who “built his successes in August and September 1870 with the same method.”<sup>114</sup> The entirety of Schlieffen’s line of reasoning was based upon his use of history. He finished his evaluation of the ride with a final appeal to history. The Brandenburger officer argued that “Examples from history have shown us that this is the only way not only to resist our enemy, but also to annihilate him.”<sup>115</sup> For Schlieffen, whatever he believed to be useful from history was the truth and should be used for the future. Furthermore, he believed his interpretation of history to

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 70.

be the most useful component for the new German Empire as a whole and his people needed him to save them from the historians who believed in objective truth in history such as Hans Delbrück.

Schlieffen aimed to use history as a unifying glue for the Germans by promoting the mythology of the foundation of the empire backed by his principle of Sedan/Cannae together with his *Gesamtschlacht* (total battle) concept. He felt a sense of urgency for his people; the Long Depression of the 1870s displayed the vulnerability of the Germans economically. The count also believed that his country's refusal to engage in a war with France throughout the early 1900s was another sign of weakness. This weakness, Schlieffen supposed, was a lack of faith in their German way of war. He felt that the idea of annihilation that had served Frederick the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte, and had also "served as the basis for all of Field Marshal von Moltke's unparalleled successes, is seemingly being gradually lost."<sup>116</sup> The enigmatic count hoped to teach his fellow Germans what he knew before it was too late.

Schlieffen's emphasis on education was recognized by his students who referred to him as the "master teacher of modern war".<sup>117</sup> Some of his famous students, such as Erich Ludendorff and August von Mackensen from the First World War, and the interwar leader of the German army, Hans von Seeckt, all wrote of their intellectual debt to the inscrutable chief of the general staff. Schlieffen wrote in one of his essays that the people "must be permeated to a man with the *Feldherr's* spirit"; not only did he achieve this within the military, but he also sought every opportunity to do so amongst the general populace.<sup>118</sup> Schlieffen, a self-appointed *Feldherr*, believed that he needed to bind the people to his spirit through his beliefs by binding them to his ideas about the foundation of Germany and the historical precedent set by Frederick the Great.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 220.



As Robert Foley has explained, “Schlieffen went further in his work than merely countering Delbrück’s interpretations; he attempted to use history to prove Delbrück wrong, but to demonstrate the exact methods by which *Feldherren* had gone about annihilating or seeking to annihilate their foes.”<sup>119</sup> Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, the head of the Historical Section of the General Staff and one of Schlieffen’s staunchest supporters, later tried to claim that Schlieffen’s works were not intended to be historical studies. He also asserted that Schlieffen was merely engaging in a discussion of strategy for future officers. However, Schlieffen clearly wrote to combat Delbrück culturally with an offensive aimed at applying the principles of Sedan and Cannae to the culture war.

Helmuth von Moltke the Younger wrote to Schlieffen about one of his articles for the *Deutsche Revue* in January of 1909 that he agreed with Schlieffen’s premise. Moltke wrote that Schlieffen’s “intention to trace and to represent for the German people the position of the Fatherland as it really is and how our security rests only on the strength possessed by our own army has been completely carried out by your words.” Moltke went even further, writing “I hope that your words will be read by thousands of people and taken to their very hearts and heeded by all of them.”<sup>120</sup> Moltke understood that Schlieffen’s writings carried a message to be heeded and stored within the very souls of the readers. He wrote very much like a new Moses for the Germans, to give them an identity and a collective spirit. Schlieffen relentlessly labored for years to cement his position amongst the brightest officers of the army, once he had achieved his goal he set about upon the public.

Schlieffen began to publish his magnum opus, the *Cannae Studies*, in order to counter the professional historian Hans Delbrück’s *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen*

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>120</sup> Alfred graf von Schlieffen, *Briefe*, trans. ed. Eberhard Kessel, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 308.

*Geschichte (The History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History)*. Although Delbrück's earlier writings undermined Schlieffen's efforts within the military, the first volume of *The History of the Art of War* threatened to destroy Schlieffen's writings through a systematic and objective military history. Schlieffen realized that his patient labors within the military were threatened by Delbrück's historical research. The resulting culture war decided the fate of history within the Kaiserreich and revolutionized German war planning by shifting the primary effort from unique planning to Schlieffen-based war making.

Schlieffen's eyes must have widened when he read Delbrück's first volume; he could not stand for ordinary Germans to be manipulated into a search for truth. Instead, Schlieffen focused the entirety of his available resources within the general staff to take the battle head on. Schlieffen sought to prove that the result "which was achieved at Cannae floated more or less" in front of the eyes of all military leaders throughout history "as a hazy but desirable goal."<sup>121</sup> He worked to secure the myth of Sedan firmly within the mythology of his new nation which he had personally fought and lost in order to help create.

Schlieffen's massive *Cannae Studies* became the focal point for the officers under his sway. Although the corps commanders of his day often disagreed with him, he won his war of words with Delbrück both culturally and within the military itself. Schlieffen began publishing his *Cannae Studies* in 1909 and did not finish publishing them until 1913. Within them his eyes roamed to and fro across the pages of history to find examples suitable for his arguments.

Schlieffen began his magnum opus with an explanation of the archetype of encirclements, the great Battle of Cannae. He wrote that at Cannae a "complete battle of annihilation (Vernichtungsschlacht) had been fought," this was "made all the more marvelous by

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<sup>121</sup> Foley, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*... 189.

the fact that, in spite of all theory, it was inflicted by a numerically inferior force.” He went on to quote both Clausewitz and the mighty Emperor Napoleon who had written that what Hannibal had done was impossible.<sup>122</sup>

Yet, Schlieffen wrote “the weaker Hannibal had acted concentrically, if in an unseemly (*unziemlich*) manner, and had turned not only the wings, but even the rear of his enemy.” Although the weapons of war had changed, the goals had not. Schlieffen explained that a “battle of annihilation can be carried out today according to the same plan devised by Hannibal in long forgotten times. The enemy front is not the goal of the principle attack.” Instead, he claimed that the “mass of the troops and the reserves should not be concentrated against the enemy front; the essential is that the flanks be crushed.... The annihilation is completed through an attack against the enemy’s rear.”<sup>123</sup> Schlieffen intended for history to be his weapon as he attempted to win his war of ink with Delbrück in order to prove that the German Empire was founded upon the ideas of Cannae at Sedan. Sedan proved to never be far from Schlieffen’s mind as he filled page after page of his *Cannae Studies*.

The *Cannae Studies* focused only upon making the assertion that the Germans had tapped into an ancient way of war and, with Moltke the Elder, had made it their own. Schlieffen hoped to salvage the beliefs of the people before men like Delbrück would be able to steer them away from culturally useful historical beliefs. Within the first few pages, Schlieffen exclaimed that with the Battle of Cannae a “complete battle of annihilation (*Vernichtungsschlacht*) had been fought, made all the more marvelous by the fact that, in spite of all theory, it was inflicted by a numerically inferior force.”<sup>124</sup> According to the count, the *Cannae Studies* revoked the wisdom of the cold dead theorist Clausewitz and the mighty Corsican who had shaken the very

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 210.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 210-211.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 210.

foundations of Europe. Hannibal with a weaker force had acted “unseemly” according to Schlieffen, but he had succeeded. Schlieffen’s focus did not remain upon the ancient battlefield in the Italian foothills; his mind’s eye remained fixed upon the useful portions of history.

Frederick the Great, the Prussian warlord who pushed his kingdom onto a path towards greatness, was the one of the focuses of the *Cannae Studies*. Schlieffen’s message for the vulnerable German people was that they were as strong as their forebears. Frederick the Great was but an example of the power held fast within the German breast. If they would but seize the tools of war and use them as Schlieffen proclaimed that they had been used in the founding of the empire; then they would be capable of even greater things than the founders of their country. Frederick the Great was a crucial linchpin in Schlieffen’s argument in the *Cannae Studies*. Frederick the Great was the first German to give an example for Schlieffen to use as historic proof of the German way of war, that there not only could be hope, but always was hope for the Germans to succeed in warfare.

Schlieffen wrote glowingly that “None more than Frederick the Great was so apt to fight a battle of annihilation with a numerically inferior strength.”<sup>125</sup> He began his examination of Frederick with an explanation of why the Prussian warlord did not attempt an encirclement at Leuthen. Although Schlieffen stated that the disposition of the Austrian troops “in general, corresponded to that of Cannae”, he explained that Frederick could not have performed an encirclement because of his lack of troops and the difficulties of the terrain.<sup>126</sup> Leuthen, Schlieffen declared, was a “mutilated Cannae”.<sup>127</sup> The Battle of Leuthen proved one aspect of Schlieffen’s historiography; he would only see what supported his thesis and not arguments against it.

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<sup>125</sup> Alfred von Schlieffen, *Cannae*, (Leavenworth: Command and General Staff School Press, 1937), 5.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Schlieffen, *Cannae*... 6.

The Battle of Zorndorf was another example of Schlieffen's loose interpretation of historical fact. Frederick the Great nearly lost the battle and modern historians tend to regard it as a draw at best for the Prussians.<sup>128</sup> However, Schlieffen interpreted it as a near battle of encirclement that would have ended in victory. The battle was at a point in the Seven Years War when the Prussians could not afford to suffer a defeat. As Schlieffen stated it "was absolutely necessary to annihilate the enemy up to his last man."<sup>129</sup> They failed to do so and suffered heavy casualties throughout the course of the battle.<sup>130</sup> Schlieffen, however, argued that "Leuthen had freed the King from the Austrians, like Zorndorf the Russians. His enemies had to form new armies for the continuation of the war."<sup>131</sup> Schlieffen's thesis required him to rewrite history in order to support the fragile creation. If Schlieffen's argumentation regarded only strategy, he would have noticed that the king's enemies did in fact create new armies and continued the war which devastated the Prussian economy.

Schlieffen's *Cannae Studies* never focused upon mere historic facts or military stratagems; he was speaking to a wider audience for a grander purpose. He concluded his study of Frederick the Great by summarizing the king's actions according to the thesis of the *Cannae Studies*. Schlieffen wrote that "It may be seen from all of the battles, won or lost by Frederick the Great, that his aim was to attack from the very beginning a flank or even the rear of the enemy". Schlieffen's mythology required this from Frederick in order to further validate the foundation of the empire. He further claimed that Frederick always intended to push his enemies "against an insurmountable obstacle and then to annihilate him by enveloping one or both of his flanks."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Christopher M. Clark, *Iron Kingdom: the rise and downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 204.

<sup>129</sup> Schlieffen, *Cannae*... 9.

<sup>130</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*... 203.

<sup>131</sup> Schlieffen, *Cannae*... 11.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

This was part of Schlieffen's message for the populace. That the Germans held within their power the ability to win wars in dramatic fashion and that they truly were a people bound together by this innate ability to achieve the ancient goal of encirclement. In spite of the fact that others could achieve it, such as Napoleon, it was the Germans who had used it longer and more effectively than any other people.

A vast majority of Schlieffen's *Cannae Studies* focused not on ancient battles long since past but rather upon the founding of the German Reich. Schlieffen wrote about Frederick the Great and Napoleon, but he spent relatively little time examining their careers. This was because Frederick fought only so many battles and since Napoleon was not German, Napoleon's victories could not be used to promote Schlieffen's agenda. Schlieffen wrote off Napoleon's eventual defeat at the hands of the Alliance by stating that it was due to his own failings. He claimed that "Napoleon gradually turned from the great battle of annihilation, had left the road which brought him to his great victories." He argued that Napoleon was defeated because he abandoned encirclements, but he stated that there was more than that. He explained that the Alliance defeated Napoleon with his own weapon, the battle of encirclement.<sup>133</sup>

Schlieffen ultimately intended to preserve the mythology that surrounded the founding of the first real nation composed primarily of Germans and it was the founding of the empire that he principally focused upon. He began by writing about the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and the Battle of Langensalza. The outnumbered Prussians attacked on 27 June, 1866. Schlieffen explained that the "battle of Cannae would thus have been repeated in the simplest way."<sup>134</sup> The Prussians were driven back and their Hanoverian opponents prepared to envelop them as Napoleon would have done. Throughout his analysis of Langensalza, Schlieffen harkened back

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 81.

to Napoleon's specter to expose the faults of the Hanoverian commanders. Schlieffen seemed irritated that the Prussians were not annihilated by the Hanoverians. He continued to repeat his belief that "Fliess should have been annihilated"<sup>135</sup> throughout his study of the battle. Schlieffen concluded that Napoleon's principles did not inherently teach the art of envelopment. Napoleon's lack of understanding of the principles of encirclement ultimately aided the Prussians.

Schlieffen inserted the language of encirclement to further mythologize the founding of the empire and impose order upon the chaos of war. Schlieffen rewrote the story of the Battle of Skalitz in 1866 in order to promote his message. Schlieffen treated Steinmetz, the Prussian commander in the battle, as a hero who did not want the Austrians to "lure him" into a trap of envelopment.<sup>136</sup> He accounted for the lack of pursuit of the fleeing Austrians by briefly describing the difficulties of such an undertaking after the battle. In addition to his reckless reinterpretation of history, he wrote in a difficult style to repel possible critics. He intended to awe his readers with his ostentatious style that made him appear to be intellectually superior. He concluded that Steinmetz was a champion for his victory in the face of such difficult odds.

The count went straight from the Battle of Skalitz to the Battle of Königgrätz, but Schlieffen claimed that this battle was one of many attempts by Moltke to produce his obsession, a double envelopment. Schlieffen wrote that the "idea of annihilating", even before the Austro-Prussian War had "completely absorbed" Moltke. The primary reason for his failure to achieve a double envelopment in 1866 was that his subordinate commanders failed to fathom his vision. The victory that Schlieffen yearned for, the total victory was not achieved. Instead, the victory the Prussians achieved at Königgrätz was, as Schlieffen put it, "transformed into an 'ordinary

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, 118.

victory” by the inadequacies of Moltke’s commanders.<sup>137</sup> These men, he expounded, simply did not understand the grandeur of Moltke’s vision or failed to comprehend the steps required to make it come about.

Schlieffen clearly desired for the Battle of Königgrätz to have been a battle of envelopment. He perforated his account of the battle with pining for his beloved commander to have achieved Schlieffen’s strategic goals. He continually writes that as “Hannibal had acted at Cannae, thus Napoleon at Jena, thus it could have been done [at Königgrätz]...”<sup>138</sup> He remorsefully concluded that the “battle had not come out as expected and desired.” Schlieffen sighed and stated that “at least, a battle rendering the greater part of the hostile army unavailable for further fighting.”<sup>139</sup> In spite of his technical writing style, Schlieffen neglected the fact that the Prussians won the war in 1866 without any sort of envelopment of the Austro-Saxon force.

The year 1870 saw two Great Powers collide upon bloodstained battlefields, but above the blood and torn bodies of young men wrenched from life, a myth formed. This perilous myth carried within its bosom the potential for great harm for its believers. Schlieffen, in his attempts to help his people, increased the perilous nature of the myth. His examination of the Battle of Sedan caused a rejection of objective history and provided the Germans with a portentous false hope in warfare. This not only laid the foundation for the German hopes of victory in World War I, but it also provided the impetus for the popularity of the Stab-in-the-Back myth in the interwar period.

The Brandenburger count worked to build upon the myth of the foundation of the empire. He tied the Battle of Sedan with the venerable father of the Prussians, Frederick the Great. He

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid, 130-131.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 135-136.



wrote that the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War, shortly before the great battle, “instinctively” returned to the “old method of warfare, commended by Frederick the Great”.<sup>140</sup> This furthered his thesis that the Germans possessed a way of war all their own and that this bound them together culturally, making them a specific people.

Schlieffen wrote that “At long last, with the battle of Sedan, a Cannae had been fought, a complete encirclement of the enemy had been achieved. None of the great *Feldherren* of the previous centuries had known the course of that battle on the Aufidus,” it was Moltke who realized the vision. Count Schlieffen chronicled Frederick’s attempts to encircle his enemies, his search for annihilation. Schlieffen claimed that this showdown upon the fields of France was a culmination of the German way of war; it was what made them a people. He interpreted Moltke’s motto to “concentration on the battlefield” and even professed that Moltke had “declared [envelopment] to be the best manoeuvre that a *Feldherr* could accomplish.”<sup>141</sup> Schlieffen finished by asserting that Sedan like the other true Cannae in history was “found right at the turning points of history.”<sup>142</sup> With the completion of the *Cannae Studies*, Schlieffen felt vindicated. He believed that his words provided the Germans what they needed culturally and his previous work with the military provided the basis for military victories in the future. For Schlieffen, war had created the German Reich and the history of its warfare would bind the Reich to a collective future.

Throughout the works Schlieffen produced, one can clearly divine a religious element to the myth of Sedan that he added to the existing myth. In Schlieffen’s *Feldheer* essay and in his speeches about Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the religious element of the myth is strikingly evident.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 257.

<sup>141</sup> Foley, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*,... 213.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 218.

Hans Delbrück began writing his first volume about military history in order to counter the current cultural trend in Germany that avoided objective history in favor of more convenient or politically acceptable history. He recognized that the myths that permeated German culture about its own unification were already entrenched by the time of his first publication in 1879. In order to counter the myth of Sedan, Delbrück set about writing a more inclusive and objective military history than his predecessors had written. His primary goals were to write the truth, challenge the long-held misconceptions of his counterparts, and, most importantly, to demolish the myths his countrymen held about their own common history. He did not feel at liberty to abuse history in order to make his point, but he sought every opportunity to challenge old beliefs about history. He hoped to build momentum in order to change his culture's perception of its own history to make it healthier and create a demand for objective history. Delbrück viewed objective truth as the anchor for a healthy culture, and he dedicated his entire life to winning the culture war for his country.

Delbrück began his culture war with a difficult challenge; he attacked the myth that Frederick the Great had sought to annihilate his enemies' forces in battles of encirclement. In 1879, Delbrück began what he called the "German historical science," which moved from the dispassionate history of Leopold von Ranke to a new all encompassing historical narrative.<sup>143</sup> Delbrück, unlike the combat historians before him, wrote military history that included much more context than mere battles and political actions.

Delbrück's examination of the Battle of Cannae placed it not only within the context of the Punic Wars but also within the context of ancient warfare itself. Within his narrative, Delbrück inspected how wars were won and lost within the world of antiquity. He proved to be

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<sup>143</sup> Hans Delbrück, *Delbrück's Modern Military History*, trans. Arden Bucholz, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 17.

an intelligent historian who realized the problems with accepting specific numbers from ancient historians like Herodotus. He held to the available data provided that it proved trustworthy.

However, when he did not have enough data, such as the strategy of the Athenian leader Pericles, Delbrück simply explained that of Pericles's victories "we know too little to be able to conclude anything as to Pericles' strategic talent".<sup>144</sup>

Delbrück countered Schlieffen in an academic dispute which resulted in a culture war over the core of what the purpose of history would be within the new German empire. His massive work focused on placing the history of warfare within the particular political and cultural context it existed in, instead of the sterile vacuum within which Schlieffen placed his history within. His intent throughout the course of his historical research was to combat what he felt was the dangerous divergence from objective truth in Germany.

In his study of warfare in antiquity, Delbrück gave further levels of context by explaining how the Romans trained, disciplined, and armed their forces throughout the Punic Wars. The Romans used a different form of a phalanx than the Greeks or the Macedonians, the manipular phalanx. The Romans' military successes also were due to the methods they used to set up camp in order to prevent ambushes. Delbrück explained the differences between other ancient peoples who used the phalanx and the Romans who instituted many differences in the way their armies travelled. One of the major differences Delbrück expounded upon was that the Romans used more stringent levels of punishment than other ancient armies. With the background of the struggle in place, Delbrück began his account of the Punic Wars.

Delbrück's depiction of the Punic Wars began by examining the primary source materials available to historians. He recognized errors in previous interpretations of the sources and even

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<sup>144</sup>Hans Delbrück, *Warfare in Antiquity*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 137.

criticized source materials written by Polybius over the lack of Roman knowledge of seafaring. He bluntly stated that Polybius “clearly fell victim to a monstrous rhetorical exaggeration” since Rome was a very old trading city by the time of the First Punic War. He expounded by stating that the details of the sources available were subject to skepticism. Delbrück concluded that to “fill in our canvas with probabilities and hypotheses would not increase our knowledge. We therefore pass quickly over this war.”<sup>145</sup> The sources concerning the Second Punic War, of which the Battle of Cannae was one of many struggles, were assembled by Polybius from Fabius Pictor who served among the Roman leaders and Hannibal’s dictated report.<sup>146</sup>

The armies that partook in the Battle of Cannae met upon a green covered plain; they met to give a true account of themselves in one of the most celebrated battles of hallowed antiquity. The Roman army was twice as large as the army led by the Carthaginian General Hannibal. Delbrück depicted the scene where the more agile African cavalry of the Carthaginians soundly defeated the Roman screen of horsemen. Thereafter, the Romans pushed their mass of unwieldy infantry forward against the Iberians and the Celts under Hannibal’s control. The Punic infantry stopped the Romans long enough for the slaughter to begin and it lasted for hours. Delbrück disclosed that the decisive point, the Carthaginian superiority in cavalry along with its attack in the rear of the Roman position was not part of Hannibal’s elaborate plan. Instead, he stated that it was an improvised action by one of his cavalry generals.<sup>147</sup>

Delbrück further analyzed the Second Punic War in its strategic elements, not merely contented with the assortment of tactical movements and choices. He explained that after a warrior had defeated his enemy in the open field, he must be capable of pursuing his “victory relentlessly, to the point of laying siege to and capturing the enemy capital; and finally, if even

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid, 301-307.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, 311-314.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, 315-335.

that does not lead to peace, he must follow through to the total defeat of the enemy.” Hannibal, he declared, “was too weak for that, and he was aware from the start of the fact that, despite his great victories, he would not be capable of besieging and capturing Rome itself.”<sup>148</sup> This deficiency overwhelmed the tactical and operational achievements of the Punic warlord.

Thus, for all of his lack of military stature, the Pomeranian professor at the University of Berlin noted something that the military men of his time failed to see. He declared that the Battle of Cannae remained inconsequential in the light of strategic realities of the Second Punic War. Regardless of the terrors wrought upon the Italian landscape by the horrifying vengeance of the Carthaginian general and his determined soldiers; they remained unable to subdue the Roman juggernaut. The Romans after Cannae “soon replaced their losses through new levies; they did not even have the legions that were stationed overseas – in Sicily, Sardinia, Spain—to return.”<sup>149</sup>

Delbrück then moved on to explain how Hannibal attempted to defeat the Romans in spite of his inability to besiege the mighty capital of Rome. He understood that he could not hope to win outright victory through strength of arms. Every legion he destroyed upon the gory field of battle would be replaced until Hannibal himself was slain with the last of his troops. Therefore, he endeavored to rupture the Roman hold upon the Italian peninsula which was based upon Rome’s position of power on the peninsula.<sup>150</sup>

Hannibal’s gamble seemed initially to work and a number of the Italian cities, including two of the largest cities, defected to the Punic side. However, these reinforcements failed to affect the outcome. The Romans struck the Carthaginians in secondary theaters, in Sicily, Sardinia, and Spain. The Romans progressively weakened the Punic position throughout the war

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, 337.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid, 336-339.

and they reformed their military. Delbrück declared that Rome underwent a massive internal change that “immeasurably increased her military potential.”<sup>151</sup> It was the transformation of the Roman army from a citizen army to professional volunteers that enabled the Roman state to defeat the Carthaginians. The events of the Second Punic War began a development that matured in Julius Caesar’s art of war.<sup>152</sup> In contrast to Chief of General Staff von Schlieffen, Professor Delbrück concluded that the Romans won the Punic Wars through other methods than merely a feat of arms.

Nor did Delbrück confine his criticisms to the ancient wars. Delbrück’s account of Frederick the Great at the Battle of Leuthen, in *The History of the Art of War*, differed greatly from Schlieffen’s account of the battle. Delbrück explained that one of the critical components of the battle was the Prussian success in moving unnoticed to the left flank of the Austrian positions. Delbrück explained that another component was the Austrian emphasis on defensive tactics. Frederick built a numerical superiority before the Austrians realized the battle had commenced. He defeated the Austrians in detail, but Delbrück stated that this was a result of strong leadership. Frederick had acted and used the good order of his infantry to defeat the Austrians. In large part, he stated, their victory was due to the good training of the Prussian infantry, because no “army of that period except the Prussians could have accomplished that.”<sup>153</sup> Delbrück took great pains to demonstrate to his audience that the theory of the Austrians and their allies was not inferior to the Prussians. Instead, the Austrians, Russians, and French lacked the execution as well as the sense of timing that Frederick displayed. Overall, what Frederick had

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 368.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 352-571.

<sup>153</sup> Hans Delbrück, *Dawn of Modern Warfare*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe, (Lincoln: University Press of Nebraska, 1990), 345-346.

was the ability to survive until the war ended; this, Delbrück wrote, not some magical theoretical formula, was what separated him from his enemies.

In order to fight at Zorndorf, Frederick abandoned Bohemia to the Austrians; then he marched to fight a battle that once again did not happen as Schlieffen described. The Battle of Zorndorf, Delbrück argued, was not a victory for the Prussians at all, but rather, it was a strategic victory for the Russians who were able to withdraw “along the Prussian front without Frederick’s daring to attack them again”.<sup>154</sup> Frederick attempted to perform an oblique attack similar to the way he attacked the Austrian positions at Leuthen. However, due to the poor terrain and stiff Russian resistance, Frederick’s Prussian forces suffered heavy casualties. The Russians withdrew from the battlefield and abandoned the Neumark, but they “besieged Kolberg” in its place. Frederick’s attempt to defeat the Russians failed. Frederick again “compensated for this defeat, not with a new victorious battle, but by well-planned fast marches that prevented the Austrians from exploited and securing their advantages that could have resulted from the capture of fortresses in Silesia and Saxony.” Finally, Delbrück argued that the battle resulted in a change in Frederick’s strategy to the strategic defensive. He decided to “let his enemies come to him”, in the light of the failures of his great offensives thus far into the war.<sup>155</sup>

Delbrück wrote that the historians of the German General Staff did not understand Frederick’s primary strategy. Frederick’s primary strategy, he argued, was to maneuver and survive until his enemies could no longer oppose him. Although Frederick declared that “necessity sometimes forced him to seek a decision by battle,” Theodor von Bernhardt, an officer of the general staff, “taught the contrary, that necessity had forced the king to avoid fighting battles.” Delbrück could not believe that the German General Staff failed to understand

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid, 352-353.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, 353.

Frederick's strategy so miserably. He exclaimed, "Can there be anything more astonishing than the fact that, one hundred years after Frederick, his strategy was no longer understood in the Prussian General Staff, which published a comprehensive, well-documented work on the wars".<sup>156</sup>

The officers who studied history for military purposes, Delbrück asserted, conducted historical probing. He further stated that such historical probing "is also dangerous," because it "only relatively justified so many of the things that the practitioner considers an absolute law." Historical probing resulted in the destruction of history for the sake of the prober's purposes. The relative justifications provided by the probers could not stand in the light of objective truth, the objective undeniable facts of history.<sup>157</sup>

Although Delbrück did not write about the history of the founding of the German Empire, he gave several speeches about Moltke the Elder in addition to all of his lectures on the subject. Delbrück, like other professors in Germany, believed that history could only be written when a minimum of fifty years had passed between the events and the historical research. Later in his career, Delbrück began gathering resources to write the history of the German Empire after he had reached the fifty year deadline. This precluded Delbrück's research until events in world politics overtook him.

In his speeches about Moltke the Elder, Delbrück gave context to the world Moltke lived within. He quoted the venerable Clausewitz who said that war was the continuation of politics by other means. The best of all situations, Delbrück explained, "is therefore the union of politics and war command in the hands of that person who holds supreme power. The interchanges between war actions and other political actions characterize great kings. After a victorious battle

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<sup>156</sup> Delbrück, *Dawn of Modern Warfare*... 377.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid*, 378.



Frederick wrote as many diplomatic notes as military orders.”<sup>158</sup> It was the uniqueness of Moltke’s power and situation that made him so special.

Delbrück further claimed that “Moltke is different from all these others in that he was exclusively a soldier.” He implied that Moltke’s abilities and special situation were the only truly unique aspect of the Wars of Unification. Delbrück contended that “Moltke was exclusively a strategist. He did not personally lead troops, he was not placed at the head of fighting forces in the midst of extreme danger, and he did not experience the bravery and reluctant fortunes that finally brought victory. His feeling for command came entirely from his position as chief of general staff.”<sup>159</sup>

Not only was his situation unique, but the methods Moltke used to conduct the war were his own as well. Delbrück contended that what this “meant was that of all great commanders Moltke is the most theoretical. The art of war that Napoleon practiced with naïve genius Moltke practiced systematically. Moltke directed his ideas toward practical conclusions.”<sup>160</sup> In spite of the fact that the public nominally gave credence to this idea by their nickname of “the battle thinker” for Moltke; Delbrück did not like the nickname. He did not like it “because it implies that strategic value lies only in planning operations. That is only part of strategy. Underlying Moltke’s decisions there was the steadfastness of will, strengthened not only by pure instinct but also by the doctrinaire correctness of his judgment.” Delbrück said that “for all other great commanders, war was only a means to their political goals. Moltke thought of his victories in another category: priceless strokes of fate created by a general staff which gave politicians, such as Bismarck, room to operate.” Delbrück stated that Moltke’s overarching goal was to give the politicians the chance to work and he never fell “into temptation to operate outside the bounds of

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<sup>158</sup> Hans Delbrück, *Delbrück’s Modern Military History*, trans. Arden Bucholz... 67.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 68.

his competence.”<sup>161</sup> Delbrück wanted to succeed in fighting the rising tendency within his country to abuse history. He tried to contend with this cultural situation through objective history that accounted for a broader scope than other historians of his day.

Delbrück, after his speech commemorating the famed historian Leopold von Ranke, concluded that Germans did not read Ranke’s work because their desire for nationalism shredded their desire to read objective history.<sup>162</sup> This essentially was the problem Delbrück faced in his culture war with Schlieffen and his general staff officers as well as his struggle for authenticity amongst his colleagues. Delbrück believed that his presentation of objective history would prevail and save the Germans from abusing history in order to achieve short-term goals.

There is perhaps nothing more terrible for a person than to hear the vitriol in his countrymen’s voices as they shout to drown out his warnings, but perhaps what was even worse for Delbrück was to lose the culture war for his people’s collective soul. Delbrück inscribed upon his tombstone “I have sought the truth – and loved my country”, sadly for Delbrück, Germany had no place for a man who sought the truth and they would not believe that he loved his country.<sup>163</sup> Throughout the course of the war, his eldest son would be killed in Macedonia and after the defeat he was forced out of the University of Berlin to an ignominious self-exile in Switzerland.

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Hans Delbrück, *Delbrück's Modern Military History*, trans. Arden Bucholz, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 11.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 37.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE PATH TO CONFLAGRATION, 1871-1914

The German culture war fought by Delbrück and Schlieffen directly or indirectly affected almost every aspect of the military affairs of the Reich. The war planning of the Kaiserreich was one aspect that directly felt the impact of the culture war waged by Delbrück and Schlieffen. After Moltke the Elder retired in 1888, the German General Staff functioned in largely the same manner until Schlieffen ascended to its head in 1891. He directly impacted the training of the military, the war planning, and the execution of future wars in order to promote his own concept of the historic German way of war.

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, after the German Wars of Unification, fixed his eyes upon Russia as the primary threat to Germany in future wars. His belief was based upon the similarities in culture and political structure that France and Germany shared, in spite of the bloodshed required by the demands of German unity. Moltke recognized that the offensives used by the Prussians in 1870 were successful, but he acknowledged that this came with a heavy sacrifice.<sup>164</sup> In the west, in case of war with France and Russia or Austria and Russia, he believed that the defensive would be better used than the offensive. He proclaimed that in case of a two front war, whatever major power faced them in the west, it would be “advisable first to utilize the advantages of the defensive before going over to the attack.”<sup>165</sup> Moltke understood precisely what the military leaders of other nations would attempt to do in an outbreak of war.

He wrote that the “character of the present-day conduct of war is marked by the attempt to obtain a great and rapid decision.”<sup>166</sup> Significantly, in contrast to the myth of encirclement

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<sup>164</sup> Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke on the Art of War*... 52.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

associated with Sedan, he did not believe that whole armies could be encircled in the open field, “because there the army is able either to fight or to give way” and, therefore, the “law is most severe with surrender in the open field”.<sup>167</sup> Moltke exclaimed that only the abnormal situations of 1870 made the capitulation of the French armies at Metz and Sedan possible! Furthermore, he reminded his readers that if “peace with Napoleon [III] been possible, Bazaine would have been the hero of France” for not allowing the experienced troops at his disposal to be destroyed for nothing.<sup>168</sup> He even wrote that in many cases victory could be achieved by marching and maneuvering alone. Principally, Moltke climaxed by concluding that a “tactical victory is decisive only if won at the strategically correct point.”<sup>169</sup>

Moltke displayed unacceptable levels of pessimism as well as politically unacceptable views for a founding father of the empire and it was a source of much relief for the leaders of the Kaiserreich when Moltke stepped down. Moltke believed that the oppression of the Polish people by the autocratic Russian Empire was an abomination. Over the course of his military career, he became increasingly pro-Polish and antagonistic towards the massive eastern empire. In one speech addressing the Polish question, a particularly thorny problem for the new German Empire, he showed his true feelings towards the Poles. He claimed that Poland possessed heroes as great as those produced by Greece or Rome, the lands of hallowed antiquity, within the bosom of its history.<sup>170</sup> He concluded, however, that the Russians had imposed a type of slavery upon the noble Poles who were forced to live within some of the “most wretched hovels ever inhabited

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>170</sup> Charles McClumpha, trans., *Essays, Speeches, and Memoirs of Field-Marshal Count von Moltke*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1893), 162.

by human beings”.<sup>171</sup> For an empire with a Polish minority, a speech such as Moltke’s appeared as a nasty contradiction of the official policies.

Finally, Moltke’s views of warfare itself were yet another unpleasant side effect of the venerable hero’s tenure for the German leaders. In a letter sent in 1879, he wrote that “every war, even a victorious one, is a national misfortune.” He continued that the heavy financial burden of the strong German military would only be lifted after generations of “better religious and moral training of nations, which again must be a fruit of centuries of historical development, which neither of us will see.”<sup>172</sup>

After Moltke retired, the German war planning took on a new life. Alfred von Waldersee, the new chief of staff in 1888, believed that German interests could be protected only by immediate offensives on both fronts in a two-front war. Waldersee was convinced that pound for pound, soldier for soldier, the German army possessed more soldierly qualities than their French counterparts. This translated into his war planning. Waldersee believed that a French offensive into Lorraine to reconquer territories lost in 1871 would enable the Germans to launch a counteroffensive. The counteroffensive, Waldersee supposed, would not require a vast quantitative superiority over its opponents.

Waldersee’s way of war relied upon the same basic principles of Moltke the Elder’s way of war; however, his conclusions about the culmination of the war remained worlds apart from his predecessor’s conclusions. Waldersee argued that the importance of railroads proved Germany’s strategic superiority. He accepted Moltke’s division of operational warfare into interior lines and exterior lines. Waldersee wrote that the interior lines of the numerous German

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 163.

<sup>172</sup> Mary Herms, trans., *Field-Marshal Helmuth von Moltke as a Correspondent*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1893), 270.

railroads would allow Germany to strike at the weakest strategic point of the enemy forces.<sup>173</sup> He believed that he could take the *Schwerpunkt* of Frederick the Great's tactics to the greatest stage to win a two-front war. Waldersee had seen firsthand the effects of Moltke's operational art and rather than tamper with the concepts or develop his own, he simply magnified them to a scale unavailable to his predecessor. Waldersee's right hand, Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, broke with both the mighty Moltke's art of war and Waldersee's plans.

Encirclements, like the one executed by Hannibal Barca, became the primary focus of the German army due to Schlieffen's focus upon them. The myth of Sedan drove Schlieffen to force the mentality of encirclement upon the German army. Schlieffen's beliefs were based upon faulty assumptions, but his reputation and his authority propelled his views from those of a mere mortal to a nearly godlike status in German military circles. Schlieffen had personally experienced the Battle of Sedan and his own distorted memory of its importance provided the impetus for his obsession.

Only the military historian, Hans Delbrück, challenged the general staff on its views of encirclement. But his views did not convince the lion's share of German officers who fell into line with Schlieffen's obsession. The officers who studied throughout Schlieffen's lengthy term of service gained an "unbounded admiration for Schlieffen" and failed to challenge any of the core of his ideas. Under Schlieffen's influence, the general staff's revisions of the annual war plan as well as their studies of military history were not chances for critical analysis. Instead, as Hew Strachan explained these exercises were used "to confirm the leading features of

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<sup>173</sup>Hew Strachan, *The First World War: Volume I: to arms*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001), 167.

[Schlieffen's] thought.”<sup>174</sup> Schlieffen unthinkingly succumbed to the myth of Sedan and in the process led the German military down the dark road to the false hope he fervently believed in.

Schlieffen institutionalized his personal obsession with envelopments by teaching the officers of the German army that they were the primary method for achieving victory. Schlieffen's Cannae Studies used a “bogus intellectualism” to bolster his claims.<sup>175</sup> Instead of critically analyzing Schlieffen's claims, the students of Schlieffen's general staff succumbed to hagiography and virtual worship of the count's teachings. He probed history in order to use examples from it in order to give further evidence for his claims.

Schlieffen did not accept the German superiority to the French at face value, this, combined with his life-long obsession with battles of encirclement, led to the German focus on swift victory in the west. Schlieffen increasingly throughout his tenure as Chief of the Greater General Staff focused on the western front in a two-front war. In the event of a general European war, Schlieffen supposed, the war in the east would largely be left to the Austrians until such time as the French surrendered. Schlieffen, like Moltke the Elder, believed that under normal circumstances the French people possessed the same qualities of the German people. Neither of the two peoples possessed an innate ‘soldierly quality’ that Napoleon and Waldersee claimed to have seen within their respective people. Schlieffen did not believe that the Russians could be quickly conquered by envelopments due to the sheer breadth of the Russian Empire's population and geography. He transferred German military attention primarily to operational art of envelopment as well as to the great and glorious possibilities his mind's eye saw glittering in the fields of France.

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<sup>174</sup>Strachan, *The First World War*... 171.

<sup>175</sup>Strachan, *The First World War*... 171.

Schlieffen's actual western plans, unlike the mythical and almighty Schlieffen Plan, consisted of a path to decision through numerous envelopments. Schlieffen planned to fight a series of envelopments across the entire front as the German army swept into France. These envelopments would crush the French army in its entirety, or close enough to its entirety to force peace upon the French. He then stipulated that the forces could be shifted to the east to aid the Austro-Hungarians who would have borne the brunt of the Russian war effort.

Schlieffen wrote in his critique of the 1894 *Generalstabreise* or general staff ride that encirclement was the decisive end to every campaign. He further stipulated that retreating behind rivers could allow for more time, but that iron-willed commanders like Schlieffen's quintessential *Feldheer* would seek confrontation to impose their will upon the chaos of war. In 1894, Schlieffen wrote that in the event of war with France and Russia, Germany would only be able to field sixteen divisions against the Russians. Of these sixteen divisions, Schlieffen stated that a minimum of fourteen must be used in an attempted encirclement of the Russian Narew Army.<sup>176</sup> Schlieffen firmly believed that only encirclement could produce victory for Germany in a general European war.

Although Moltke the Younger did not adhere to Schlieffen's conclusions, he did maintain the essence of Schlieffen's planning. Moltke felt that any general war in Europe would be a catastrophe. However, he believed that the only hope for Germany was to successfully envelop French forces in numerous battles of encirclement in the opening salvos of the war. Moltke's art of war possessed a desperation that was notably missing from Schlieffen's tenure. Moltke proved in 1914 that he felt that Germany only possessed one opportunity for a speedy victory and would

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<sup>176</sup>Terence Zuber, *German War Planning, 1891-1914: sources and interpretations*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004) 137-138.



be forced to fight a long war if they missed the opportunity of envelopments. He collapsed from the emotional and psychological strain of the attempt, succumbing to death on 18 June 1916.

Moltke never separated himself from his predecessor; self-recrimination and doubt clouded his mind. He was not the most qualified candidate to take the post of the Chief of Greater General Staff, let alone to take it from the supposed intellectual giant of Schlieffen.<sup>177</sup> His planning and leadership remained fully within the strategic shadow of the aged count and Moltke's own uncle. With the weight of the empire's false hope upon his shoulders, Moltke planned to fight the war of encirclements that the myth of Sedan and Schlieffen himself had prescribed for the ailment of armed conflict. Moltke the Younger, in contrast to the masterful conductor of the elder Moltke, was more of a conductor's baton that had been left to lead the orchestra in a way that was both foolhardy and dangerous. Moltke's art of war was not so much of an art but rather a stiff, fatalistic, self-recriminating print of a clumsy painting.

Moltke's planning involved a massive invasion that attempted to destroy the French army in great battles of encirclement, just as Schlieffen had envisioned it. But he was willing to commit more of his most precious commodity on his gamble; what he dedicated to his proposition was time. What primarily contributed to Moltke's plans was Schlieffen's victory in the culture war against Delbrück. Because of Schlieffen's stature in the public eye and especially in the eyes of the military, Moltke could not abandon Schlieffen's plans without committing professional suicide.

The invasion of France in 1914 theoretically could have ended in a devastating strategic defeat for the French army and nation. In spite of that fact, the invasion failed to secure the strategic victory that remained a mere hair-breadth away from the eager grasp of the German

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<sup>177</sup>Strachan, *The First World War*... 172.

army. It was the chance that victory could be achieved that brought about the vast invasion of France. Schlieffen spent nearly his entire tenure as chief of the greater general staff and much of his retirement obsessing over the theoretical aspects of a two-front war against Russia and France.

The majority of historians have accepted that the Germans launched the invasion of France with a plan written by the former Chief of General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen. However, new research reveals that the Schlieffen *Denkschrift* (memorandum) was not the cohesive plan that guided the German actions in 1914. Instead, it appears likely that the Germans used the plan written by Helmuth von Moltke the Younger as he observed the constantly shifting tectonic plates of the often volatile European politics. Regardless of the war plan's authorship, Moltke the Younger did chase after victories through battles of encirclement.

The Schlieffen Plan contained a general direction for a war effort rather than a detailed mobilization plan that the German General Staff had proved capable of producing. The Schlieffen Plan called for more divisions than Germany could muster in either 1905 when Schlieffen wrote the *Denkschrift* as well as in 1914 when World War I broke out. It lacked a sense of realism as the plan allowed for much of Germany to be occupied in a politically unacceptable move.

A majority of historians recognize the significance of the Schlieffen Plan and many of them claim that it was the plan the Germans used in the opening campaigns of the First World War.<sup>178</sup> John Keegan goes so far as to claim that the Schlieffen Plan served as the most important government document written in the first decade of the Twentieth Century. Keegan's views were

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<sup>178</sup> L.C.F. Turner, *War Plans of the Great Powers: 1880-1914*, ed. Paul Kennedy, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1979), 199-217.

derived from a German general staff officer, Groener; his interpretation has been taught at numerous universities and at the British military academy at Sandhurst.

Keegan claims that it might well have been the most important document written for “the last hundred years, for what it caused to ensue on the field of battle, the hopes it dashed, were to have consequences that persist to this day.”<sup>179</sup> Furthermore, Keegan maintains that the Schlieffen Plan’s influence was fueled by its inexorable progress. He concludes that Schlieffen’s 1905 plan was the piece of paper that the Kaiser allowed to determine the outbreak and early prosecution of the war.<sup>180</sup>

Holger Herwig continues the current paradigm by arguing that “The Germans gambled all on a brilliant operational concept devised by Chief of General Staff Alfred von Schlieffen in 1905 and carried out (in revised form) by his successor, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, in 1914”.<sup>181</sup> Herwig asserts that the Germans had bet that a quick triumph against France would achieve victory and would then allow them to face the Russians alone.<sup>182</sup> Herwig aims at explaining the German actions in the Battle of the Frontiers and the Battle on the Marne from the attackers’ perspective. He also argues that the perspective of the Germans has been neglected as French and English historians have focused vast amount of resources and time on researching the Entente’s leaders and point of view.<sup>183</sup> Herwig’s claims are not original, but rather, they fall squarely within the current model of historical thought on the opening days of the First World War in France.

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<sup>179</sup> John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Random House Publishing, 2000), 28.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>181</sup> Holger Herwig, *The Marne: the opening of World War I and the battle that changed the war*, (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2009), xi-xiii.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, 310.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, xiv.

Hew Strachan, the noted historian, explains that the post-war head of the German army, Wilhelm Groener, and others greatly distorted the facts about the war plan that Germany attempted in 1914. Several German officers from the greater general staff, Strachan stated, characterized the Schlieffen *Denkschrift* as the perfect operational plan for victory. According to Groener and his compatriots, the Germans were to concentrate first against France in the west, then they were to achieve victory against France in a mere six weeks. The German army, they argued, was to pivot with a strong wing on the right, with the weaker wing on the left in Alsace-Lorraine. According to Groener, Strachan explains that the problem “was that Schlieffen retired in 1905” instead of staying to lead the confrontation.<sup>184</sup>

Strachan expertly elucidates that the German general staff, which employed up to 650 highly trained officers by 1913, continuously analyzed and revised its plans each year. Whatever plan Schlieffen wrote in 1905, Strachan confidently states, “was specific to that year, it was an incremental evolution from the plans of previous years, and it was not a definitive statement”. In addition, Strachan expounds that the general staff never believed it could create such a perfect plan that it was “intended to remain unchallenged over subsequent years.”<sup>185</sup> In contrast to Groener’s explanation of Schlieffen’s 1905 plan, which relied upon divisions which did not exist, Strachan asserts that it was intended to argue for increases in the army’s strength.<sup>186</sup> Many of the *Denkschriften* that were written throughout the years by German chiefs of general staff possessed similar purposes. Chiefs of general staff wrote these types of exercises specifically to argue for their agendas at that moment.

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<sup>184</sup> Strachan, *The First World War...* 164

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, 166.

Terence Zuber challenges the current mode of thinking. Zuber explains how the Schlieffen Plan was not a real plan but rather a “very general paraphrase”.<sup>187</sup> The only evidence of the infamous Schlieffen Plan showed that the plan had originally been written after Schlieffen’s retirement in 1905 and backdated to appear as though Schlieffen had written the document during his term as the Chief of General Staff.<sup>188</sup> Zuber further claims that the plan never could have been enacted due to the astronomical number of divisions needed to accomplish Schlieffen’s ideas.<sup>189</sup> Zuber maintains that Moltke the Younger was the writer and originator of the German plans in 1914. Zuber argues that it was real world situations that caused Moltke to write and rewrite his war plans as the situation changed from year to year.<sup>190</sup> Zuber actively challenges the current ideas about the Schlieffen Plan and the German strategic goals in 1914. His work denies the idea of a militaristic German gamble that had been in place for years and replaces that idea with one of Moltke the Younger actively observing the shifting political and military realms in Europe and writing his own war plans independently of Schlieffen.

Robert Citino claims that Schlieffen’s aggressive plan represented the Prusso-German way of war which had guided German war making from Hermann Cherusci until 1945. According to Citino, this way of war guided all of the German military planners who wrestled with the problem of a two-front war against France and Russia. The German officers were taught from their first lesson to their last breath to march to the sounds of the guns and fight aggressively.<sup>191</sup>

Arden Bucholz, in contrast, argues that the German planning took on an entirely different direction than most historians perceive. For Bucholz, the German war planning was a “process”

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<sup>187</sup> Terence Zuber, *The Real German War Plan 1904-1914* (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>189</sup> Terence, Zuber, ‘The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered,’ *War in History* 3 (1999): 262-305.

<sup>190</sup> Terence Zuber, *The Real German War Plan 1904-1914*, (Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2011), 180.

<sup>191</sup> Citino, *The German Way of War...* 306-309.

that contained four interactive parts: the organizational, representational, educational, and analytical.<sup>192</sup> Bucholz argues that the dangerous international situation saw the rise of the technical experts within the German military.<sup>193</sup> Bucholz makes the surprising assertion that not only did Moltke the Younger not water down or ruin the Schlieffen plan; he declares that Moltke did not have much to do with the German war planning. Bucholz states that the attacks on Moltke may be irrelevant because “there is little evidence that [Moltke] had a consistent impact on war planning.”<sup>194</sup> While many historians often vilify Moltke or at least criticize him for his supposed weaknesses as a military planner; Bucholz asserts that Moltke the Younger was comparatively irrelevant to the German war plan in 1914 in its entirety.

Regardless of the identity of the author of the German battle plan, the bitter reality became apparent as the German armies dived into enemy territory. The Germans attempted larger scale encirclements than any that had been attempted before in military history. Because of their focus on battles of encirclement, the Germans attempted to surround entire French armies and army groups. Moltke and the other German generals sought to decimate the French formations in the first few months of the First World War. Upon the central rolling hills of Belgium, the Germans sped through the defenders and their fortresses. Even in the wooded hills and valleys of the Ardennes Forest the German infantry used their superior tactics to quickly drive the French back in confusion. The German offensive nearly achieved its primary purpose at Namur when German forces nearly cut off vast numbers of French troops in a *Kesselschlacht* or cauldron battle.

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<sup>192</sup> Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 1991), 13-17.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 214.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, 223.

## CHAPTER 6

### GREAT AND GLORIOUS POSSIBILITIES: 1914 IN THE WEST

The Germans proved adept at warfare and this played out as the conflagration burned brighter in the first western campaign in France in 1914. In the Battle of Rossignol, Schlieffen's influences upon the tactical and operational actions of the German army proved very effective; they destroyed one of the elite units of the French army, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Colonial Division. The long-term volunteers of the professional colonial division were led by one of the rising stars of the French military, Jules Lefèvre. In the thick overgrown forest, the even numbered forces blasted one another. The Germans hit the French in the flank and along their front; the French commander said that the enemy appeared like "a jack-in-the-box".<sup>195</sup> Only through an extravagant use of field artillery did the tattered remnants of the French Colonial Corps escape total destruction.<sup>196</sup> The battle raged from 21-23 August 1914 and Schlieffen's influences upon the tactics of the German army proved to be effective in one of many cases as the French were driven before the advancing Germans.

Operationally, Moltke the Younger's force accepted Schlieffen's principles of encirclement almost to the extreme. Moltke devoted a vast majority of the German army to the western assault against the French. He swept this force in the general direction of Paris in order to stir up the French army and scare them into the pockets of destruction intended for them. In the Ardennes, Moltke's army had "crossed off four French armies from the original order of battle's five."<sup>197</sup> The Belgian fortresses failed to slow down the invading Germans and the French command continued to be hampered by pre-war prejudices against reservists of all

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<sup>195</sup> Terence Zuber, *The Battle of the Frontiers: Ardennes 1914*, (Charleston: The History Press, 2007), 126.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

<sup>197</sup> Robert Citino, *The German Way of War: from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 211.

nations. By August 23<sup>rd</sup>, Moltke positioned his forces for one of the greatest victories in all of military history.

At the battles of Namur and the Sambre the Germans nearly achieved the largest envelopments ever attempted by any army in all of military history up to the Great War. As Robert Citino noted, the destruction of the last intact French field army with hundreds of thousands of prisoners would have forced a painful reexamination of the chances for the French to achieve victory. The news also would have reached the public simultaneously with the news of Tannenberg. But a French defeat at Namur did not come to pass in spite of the fact that the French commander, General Lanrezec, could not decide whether to attack or defend. As the brunt of the German invasion bore down on the French forces, Lanrezec's men failed to collect the proper supplies for an attack or entrench themselves in the brown Belgian earth.<sup>198</sup>

The German 2<sup>nd</sup> Guards Division led the German assault against the French positions which were shielded by the Sambre and Meuse Rivers on 21 August. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Guards Division broke through the Sambre River defenses and formed a beachhead. The French counterattacked against the four-mile wide breach held by the Germans. The French foolishly attacked in true Napoleonic style with bugles and unit colors flapping in the breeze only to have the German infantry shatter the assault upon the ripe Belgian beet fields. *The furia francese*, fury of the French, completely failed to dislodge the Germans or even exchange equal blows with the invaders. The French attacks to this point in the war often resembled a bagpiper hunting deer while practicing his loud instrument. The French dashed nine divisions upon the rocks of the three German divisions defending the beachhead. To make matters worse, the French lost contact with the British near Mons leaving them totally exposed for an encirclement. Strategically, the

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid, 213-214.



only consolation Lanrezec could muster was his retreat before the fury of the Germans, while the Germans only managed to secure nearly worthless ground by 23 August.<sup>199</sup>

The Battle of Namur signaled the beginning of the end for Moltke's attempt to come out from beneath his uncle's large shadow. The battle proved the effectiveness of German tactics, as one historian recently noted.<sup>200</sup> But the battle also proved the inadequacies of the operational and, more importantly, the strategic failings of Schlieffen's strategy. Unlike the theories born in the minds of Schlieffen's worshipers, Moltke dedicated all of the necessary resources to perform the great experiment.

Delbrück understood that a wrong interpretation of history, like the myth of Sedan, could have declared that the possibility of an *Ermattungsstrategie*, or strategy of hanging on, was what Frederick the Great had done in his wars. Although Schlieffen had died in 1913, his ideas and his followers dominated the military as well as the government. Delbrück constantly debated Schlieffen's ideas throughout the First World War. His more inclusive historical interpretation could have helped avoid the emphasis upon *Vernichtungsstrategie* or annihilation strategy that permeated the German General Staff. He drew comparisons between Frederick the Great's position during the Seven Years War with the German position at the end of 1914. He explained the war had become a standoff. He cautioned his readers against an overabundance of optimism in regards to Germany's position in the war. Delbrück reminded them that "Frederick also lost many battles," but he "finally emerged victorious."<sup>201</sup>

Delbrück argued before the Great War that misunderstanding history can have dire consequences and can lead to even worse situations when military men look for solutions to

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid, 214-215.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, 214.

<sup>201</sup> Bucholz, *Delbrück's Modern Military History*... 128

future problems in history. He had warned against Schlieffen's misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Moltke and Sedan. By the conclusion of 1914, he was vindicated. He wrote in the beginning of 1915 that the opening months of the year necessitated caution. Furthermore, he argued the Germans needed to negotiate with their enemies because their attempt to win a decisive battle had failed. He explained that at the end of 1914 the "decision is still very much up in the air and depends on which side can reinforce more rapidly."<sup>202</sup> Delbrück declared that the war had evolved into both sides fighting from their positions in France. He included a brief discussion of how the technology of the day nearly prohibited a strategy of encirclement.<sup>203</sup> What his readers were able to understand was that a quick victory was no longer a possibility, in spite of the initial promise of the *Vernichtungsstrategie*.

Schlieffen interpreted military examples very differently from Delbrück; he claimed that military leaders always tried to encircle their enemies. He stated that military history was filled with examples of a two-front *Vernichtungsstrategie*. He went further, arguing that "Military history has shown us the means of achieving such an annihilation. Friedrich the Great strove for it repeatedly... The Alliance broke Napoleon's domination in October 1813 in the same way." For Schlieffen history always returned to Sedan and Cannae. He concluded that "The immortal Field Marshal Graf von Moltke built his successes in August and September 1870 with the same method."<sup>204</sup> Schlieffen built the myth of Sedan upon his historical method that presupposed a lack of inherent value in history itself.

Schlieffen argued throughout his tenure as the Chief of General Staff that history only existed to fulfill the needs of the present and the future. Schlieffen's students thoroughly imbibed his lessons. One of his key students, Wilhelm Groener, wrote "I do not write for history... I write

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>204</sup> Foley, *Alfred von Schlieffen's Military Writings*... 63.

for the future,” he concluded that he would only write for future wars and future soldiers.<sup>205</sup>

Schlieffen taught that the history of the German Fatherland handed down examples for the future. He went even further, arguing that history could predict the future. He declared that soldiers can give their trust to a man “who holds steady to the look forward and who knows the future, not as a prophet or a seer, but rather as one who has learned to read carefully from the book of history what will, and indeed must, come to pass.”<sup>206</sup> According to Schlieffen, history existed to provide a view of the future for military leaders.

The German military trusted Schlieffen’s view of the future and attempted to achieve his aims on the battlefield. They hoped to vindicate all of his theories on the Western Front in August of 1914. Moltke the Younger nearly encircled enormous French armies at Namur and along the Sambre. While Schlieffen later appeared victorious to an anxious German population after the eastern battle of Tannenberg; in the West his theories about the German way of war fell apart. The Germans failed to encircle the retreating French who quickly launched massive counterattacks along the Marne. Every effort to break the French failed, regardless of the loss of life or material. The German war planning, which was so strongly affected by Schlieffen and his beliefs, totally failed the empire’s warriors in their efforts to win the Great War.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid, xvii.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 232.

## CHAPTER 7

### EASTERN MIRAGE: THE BATTLE OF TANNENBERG, 1914

Meanwhile, amongst the virgin forests, lakes, and rivers of the German province of East Prussia the Germans would be forced to test their mettle against the Russians. The Germans needed to avoid catastrophe in Prussia if they were to commit themselves to a Schlieffen-style offensive in France. Moltke the Younger assigned the defense of the East Front to a man he trusted, Maximilian von Prittwitz. Prittwitz descended from an ancient Silesian aristocratic family and had fought in the German Wars of Unification as a younger man. He needed all of the fortitude he could muster to face the much larger Russian force that he expected to invade Prussia at the outset of hostilities.

The Russian offensive sought to reignite the fires of power that Peter the Great had lit within the Russian soul. They had been working to develop their own modern war plans since the 1880s.<sup>207</sup> It was a complex plan that would overwhelm the Germans. The countless rivers, lakes, and primitive forests made any invasion difficult. The Russians predicted that an invasion into Masuria would be the attack through a non-mountainous region in the world. However, their two separate armies were to drive into Prussia and push the German forces before them. If they were lucky, the Germans would run to the fortresses at Königsberg where the Russians could starve them out. If they were not lucky, the Germans would escape to form a tentative line along the relatively shallow Vistula.

Strategically, the Germans needed to avoid defeats of any magnitude on the eastern front; however, the commanding officers were willing to risk major defeats in order possibly achieve Schlieffen's dream of a German *Heimat*. Officers such as von François and Hoffmann proved

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<sup>207</sup> David A. Rich, *The Tsar's Colonels: Professionalism, Strategy, and Subversion in Late Imperial Russia*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 89.

fanatically dedicated to the glory of Schlieffen's visions. The original German commander in East Prussia, von Prittwitz, proved cautious and unwilling to gamble strategic security for Schlieffen's ideas. The officers surrounding him, however, demonstrated their commitment to the concept of the German way of war. Their motto was "When the Russians come, not defense only, but offensive, offensive, offensive."<sup>208</sup> François, for one, began to unravel Prittwitz's plans from the beginning of the campaign for his old mentor.

François's I Corps began the German response to the Russian invasion with an attempt to achieve a small-scale encirclement of the Russian forces on 20 August, 1914. The 2<sup>nd</sup> German Division attacked in heavy fog early in the morning and caught the Russians in their bivouac areas with artillery and rifle fire. The Russian artillery, however, wreaked havoc upon the attacking Germans as they zeroed in on the infantry and their supporting artillery pieces. The Germans finally reached one of their primary objectives, a village called Uszballen, at 11:30 a.m. but the time had already passed for François to achieve his prized encirclement. François's 1<sup>st</sup> Division fared as poorly as their 2<sup>nd</sup> Division counterparts in their assault against the Russian-held villages. The green troops struggled in the heavy fog of war with the screams of men and horses in the chaotic battle for Brakupönen, another key position in the Russian lines. German accounts of the battle recall the bravery and endurance of their forces. The Russians fell back, but François finally recognized that the battle had failed and he gave the order to halt for the rest of the day at 4 p.m.<sup>209</sup>

The first attempt by a German officer to achieve the worshiped encirclement-victory was largely forgotten in the aftermath of the Battle of Tannenberg. François's attempt showed the recklessness that many officers imbibed during the years under Schlieffen's tutelage.

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<sup>208</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 135.

<sup>209</sup> Dennis Showalter, *Tannenberg: clash of empires, 1914*, (Dulles: Potomac Books, 2004), 388.

Francois upset the larger plan in his bid for glory and vindication for the thoughts of the dearly departed Count Schlieffen. By the end of the Battle of Gumbinnen, François's I Corps not only failed to stage a Sedan against the Russians, they were in danger of being enveloped themselves by the determined Russians. The smaller scale attempt by François to apply Schlieffen's school solution to the problem at hand utterly failed.

Gumbinnen set the stage for one of two options for the overall German commander in East Prussia. Prittwitz decided, after the fiasco delivered by Francois against his orders, to retreat to the Vistula River. He feared an encirclement of his 8<sup>th</sup> Army by the Russian forces. The move to abandon East Prussia seemed logical to Prittwitz in spite of the abuse that has been heaped upon him since the conclusion of the war. Prittwitz needed to maintain his force in the field. If he allowed his forces to be decimated in early attacks against the Russians, he would expose all of eastern Germany to occupation and a very real threat of total defeat for the Germans in the war. Francois's attacks tactically exposed the deficiencies of inexperienced troops and officers, especially in the difficult East Prussian terrain. Prittwitz believed that the Vistula River would give his troops the breathing room they required to receive reinforcements needed to hold the Russian juggernaut.<sup>210</sup>

Prittwitz's lack of calm did nothing to aid the anxious nerves in Berlin. When he called his superior to discuss the situation, it resulted in an unpleasant conversation that jolted Prittwitz from the purely military situation to the full reality. No reinforcements would be forthcoming and the Germans could not afford the strategic defeat of a full retreat to the Vistula River. Instead, he decided to retreat into West Prussia. Upon the recommendation of the operations

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid, 168-177.

section Moltke replaced Prittwitz and his chief of staff with the victor of Liege, Erich Ludendorff, as well as the ancient Paul von Hindenburg.<sup>211</sup>

Colonel Max Hoffmann, Prittwitz's deputy chief of operations, gave orders in the absence of a commander and set the stage for the battle that would be named Tannenberg. Francois's I Corps were transported quickly, using ample railroad lines, to the southwest in order. The other two corps commanders, von Mackensen and von Below, were ordered to hit Samsonov's 2<sup>nd</sup> Army in the Russian army's center and western flank. The plan was audacious, but it used the railroads and counted on the inability for Rennenkampf's army to march by foot through the heavy undergrowth of the untouched forest in order to be a decisive force in the coming battle. Although it has been represented as a massive gamble, when placed in the context of the Eastern Front in the entire First World War, it represented a mild gamble for military planners.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff eagerly desired to defeat the Russians, but the situation was unclear. Francois's corps detrained, however, due to the stubborn foolishness of the commander; they did not aid their fellow troops. Francois only wished to obey orders guaranteed to grant him supreme glory and did not attack as ordered on 26 August. Ludendorff and Hoffmann drove from their headquarters to order the taciturn general in person to launch the attack on 27 August. Samsonov's forces threatened to break the German lines before them and shatter Mackensen's and Below's corps. Only when ordered in person and threatened with removal did Francois order his forces to attack and turn the tide of the battle.

On 27 August, the German I Corps attacked the Russian eastern flank and surprised the Russian forces; however, they remained unconcerned until the chance for escape had long since

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 196-198.

passed. Samsonov believed that the German attack on his eastern flank was an attempt at distracting him from fully pursuing the 8<sup>th</sup> Army. He pressed on in spite of the fact that pressure on his flanks increased as the German forces attacked with increasing levels of firepower. The village of Soldau, the primary Russian communications hub with telephones and telegraph machines, quickly fell to I Corps' attacking troops. By the end of the day on August 28, Samsonov finally recognized that his forces were being encircled and that he could not break through the heavily entrenched German center in front of him. He ordered a general retreat for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, but by that late date it was too late to do so. In addition, Samsonov faced the difficulty of communicating with his troops, with Soldau captured and German artillery hounding the Russian troops it was nearly impossible for the commander to communicate with his men. Samsonov rode off into the woods, encountered German fire, and chose to master his own fate through suicide.<sup>212</sup>

The Germans had inflicted a large defeat upon the Russians and it happened similarly to the methods handed down by the venerable Schlieffen before the war. Von Francois declared that the Battle of Tannenberg was the school example of a battle of encirclement, even comparing it to Schlieffen's favorite battle, Cannae.<sup>213</sup> According to the official German history, the most reliable numbers on the aftermath of the battle, they captured 92,000 Russian prisoners with another 50,000 soldiers killed or wounded.<sup>214</sup> In contrast, the Germans suffered mildly according to the bloody arithmetic of war, only suffering 20,000 total casualties. The size of the victory meant that the Germans were unsure about the size of their triumph; it was not until 4 September 1914 that Hoffmann wrote accurately about the size of the success.<sup>215</sup> As soon as the

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid, 306-309.

<sup>213</sup> Hermann von Francois, *Tannenberg: das Cannae des Weltkrieges*, (Chicago: Verlag Die Neue Zeit, 1923), 1.

<sup>214</sup> Showalter, *Tannenberg*... 323.

<sup>215</sup> Max Hoffmann, *War of Lost Opportunities*, (New York: International Publishers, 1925), 41.



shooting started to die down, the German leaders began squabbling about the glory for the victory. The battle was not named for the location in which it was fought, which was near Allenstein; instead, it was named for the great Novgorodian victory over the Teutonic Order in 1410.<sup>216</sup>

Operationally, the Germans achieved a relatively small victory. Although historians and generals have sought to increase the importance of the victory; the Germans only barely secured the safety of their own territory. The defeat of the Russian 2<sup>nd</sup> Army laid the foundation for yet another battle for the German forces in East Prussia. The Russian Empire did not collapse, nor did they accept that the battle was decisive. In the aftermath of Tannenberg, it was the Battles of the Masurian Lakes that led to the Russian withdrawal from Prussia. All of their victories in Prussia failed to impact the strategic sphere of the war.

Strategically, the Germans accomplished absolutely nothing. On the West Front, the German troops found little relief in the victories their brothers accomplished; furthermore, the eastern victory had seized valuable reinforcements from the hard-pressed troops in the west. Hindenburg and Ludendorff used the troops sent to them in order to drive the remaining Russian army from Prussia, but this act was strategically insignificant.<sup>217</sup> On the West Front, the French forced the Germans to fall back into defensive positions, in part, because of the lack of these troops.

In contrast to Ludendorff's descriptions of the battle, the Russians won the greatest strategic victory on the Eastern Front of the war in 1914. The Austrians attempted to use the German victories in Prussia with a strike into Poland. The Austrian commander, Conrad von Hötzendorff, was so confident of victory that he named a governor general of Warsaw at the

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<sup>216</sup> Strachan, *The First World War...* 137.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid*, 334-335.

outset of the campaign. But he was totally defeated by the Russians and driven into the Carpathian Mountains, setting the stage for one of the most brutal struggles of the First World War. The Russians, by the end of 1914, had surrounded one of the greatest Austrian fortresses and put themselves almost on the very doorstep of Hungary.<sup>218</sup> All of the German victories in East Prussia shriveled in comparison with the Russian victories against the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The Germans, however, remained unwilling to accept Tannenberg's relative unimportance in the war, in fact, the Germans created a myth around the battle similar to the myth of Sedan. Tannenberg built upon the sweeping power in culture and society that Sedan enjoyed. Tannenberg's myth presented the radical rightwing parties such as the NSDAP the victorious symbol of World War I. In addition, Tannenberg became a part of the Stab-in-the-Back Myth that haunted Germans historically and politically throughout the life of the Weimar Republic as well as the Nazi regime.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 356-357.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

Unfortunately for Germany, the grand and glorious possibilities that glittered upon western battlefields in the mind of Schlieffen were naught but the song of some devilish siren. Battles of encirclement only happen under the most opportune of circumstances when one is faced by the most witless of opponents upon the best terrain for the maneuvers. The myth of Sedan proved too robust to die with so many boys in 1914. The myth of Sedan, aided by the glories of Tannenberg and the other victories of the Great War, set the stage for the *Dolchstoss*, the Stab-in-the-Back Myth in the aftermath of the war.

Friedrich Ebert, the first president of the Weimar Republic, which supplanted the *Kaiserreich*, declared to the returning troops in 1918 that “No enemy has defeated you. Only when the enemy’s superiority in numbers and resources became suffocating did you relinquish the fight.”<sup>219</sup> The Socialist Party leader used the one slogan that seemed to unite the fractured Germans after the ignominious conclusion of the First World War. He argued that the Germans were “im Felde unbesiegt” or undefeated in the field. The Weimar Republic “faced the abyss of capitulation without a struggle” due to the insidious nature of the myth of Sedan. The myth of Sedan proclaimed that the Germans possessed a unique way of war and this proclamation seemed to be vindicated in the victory of Tannenberg.

The logic followed that if the Germans were martially superior to their foes, then they could only be defeated through treachery. Ebert and others like him accepted the myth of Sedan’s premise by arguing that the Germans were undefeated in the field of battle. The idea of *im Felde unbesiegt* demanded a further explanation of why the victorious Germans lost the war.

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<sup>219</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: on national trauma, mourning, and recovery*, trans. Jefferson Chase, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2003), 203.

The *Dolchstoss* was a destabilizing force in the Weimar Republic. The military continually blamed civilians and politicians alike for the collapse they had started. The military was also protected by the myths of Sedan and the Stab-in-the-Back; this left the socialists and any other supporters of the republic in the blast zone of blame.

Although talented historians like Wolfgang Schivelbusch argue that the leaders of the SPD, the ruling party in the Weimar Republic, created the *Dolchstoss* to support their aims; in all actuality they fell prey to the myth of Sedan and Tannenberg.<sup>220</sup> Ebert and the other Weimar leaders were unable to promote a different ideology. They appeared to firmly believe that the German army had not been defeated by the Entente in the First World War. The victory at Tannenberg justified, in their minds, the myth of Sedan and the lack of victory in the West could not shake the myth from their minds.

The Germans attempted to achieve Schlieffen's aims on the battlefield and vindicate all of his theories on the Western Front in August of 1914. Moltke the Younger nearly encircled enormous French armies at Namur and along the Sambre River. While Schlieffen later appeared victorious to an anxious German population after the eastern battle of Tannenberg; in the West his theories about the German way of war fell apart. The Germans failed to encircle the retreating French who quickly launched massive counterattacks along the Marne. Every effort to break the French failed, regardless of the loss of life or material. The German war planning, which was so strongly affected by Schlieffen and his beliefs, totally failed the empire's warriors to fight the Great War.

Schlieffen's war planning and the planning of his successors centered on the idea that the Germans possessed a singular way of war. Based on his historical work, Schlieffen planned for

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid, 193.

his people to only search for victory in grand encirclements that could bring about complete success. Moltke the Elder had prepared for wars that would transform the political structure of Europe, just as the Seven Years War and the Thirty Years War had done. He often compared Europe to a powder keg that, if lit, would destroy the fruits of his generation's labors. His successor, von Waldersee, strayed from Moltke's pessimistic thoughts into the warm glow of optimism. Waldersee's influential successor, Alfred graf von Schlieffen, quickly transformed the entirety of German military history and war planning into the framework of his theories. His works hamstrung the Germans, not only militarily, but historically, as well.

Hans Delbrück, the professional historian from the University of Berlin, dared to spit in the very eye of the myth of Sedan. He challenged the foundation of Schlieffen's works. He truly believed in the objectivity of history and the concept that contextual history represented a fundamental component to humanity itself. He crafted his lengthy works on military history and lectures to send the message that objective history deserved to be the only history. He attacked the myth of Sedan before its dogmatization by Schlieffen and the officers of the German General Staff. He criticized the opponents of his holistic style who complained that he was treading upon the separate traditions of political, economic, and military history. He refused to back down from his concept of objectivity in history. Eventually, Delbrück became such a foe of Schlieffen's popular historical ideas that even the Kaiser singled him out as an enemy of the monarchy and the German people in general.

Unification came through enormous sacrifice on the part of average citizens of the new German Reich. The Prussians first defeated the Austrians, Hanoverians, and their various allies in 1866. The Battle of Königgrätz convinced the Austrians to negotiate and end the war. In 1870, the French declared war on the Prussians and faced the might of the combined German states.

The Germans dramatically defeated the Second Empire of France in the Battle of Sedan and the myth that the Germans possessed a singular way of war was born in fire, steel, and blood.

Schlieffen's historical ideas and his guiding principles of history infiltrated not only the German military, but the average citizens of the German Empire as well. The German Empire possessed one national holiday that was celebrated throughout the Reich, *Sedantag*. *Sedantag* possessed the power of bringing Germans from various social spheres together to honor the German flag and sing patriotic songs. The German people accepted Schlieffen's mythology about the foundation of the empire in the flames of unification.

The myth of Sedan linked the *Kaiserreich* with the Third Reich. Both empires required a myth and both empires used the aura of history to provide the foundation for the myth. The myth of Sedan necessitated that the Germans could not be defeated if they used their way of war. In the light of their defeat in the Great War, therefore, the Germans created another myth by warping history to their own ends. By doing so, they shored up the myth of Sedan and stepped forth onto the slippery slope to National Socialism. These dangerous myths glittered in the minds of Germans until the reign of death ended in 1945. They centered on the idea that history could be manipulated for the purposes of the people.

Nationalism challenges objectivity in every way; its very nature brought about a culture war between Delbrück and Schlieffen. While Delbrück believed that nationalism needed to be controlled in the minds of his countrymen through a strong emphasis on context and objectivity; Schlieffen argued for his myth in addition to subjectivity. German nationalism propelled the myth of Sedan to the level of sacred doctrine amongst the military.

The myth of Sedan performed two main tasks: it redefined the purpose of history and it focused the military upon the ideal victory of encirclement. It created a single-mindedness

among most of the German officers who believed that their ultimate goal needed to be *Vernichtungsschlachten*, or battles of annihilation. The myth also made the Germans especially vulnerable to further myths that eventually would destroy Germany in the Second World War. The *Dolchstoß* or the Stab-in-the-Back myth needed the foundation that the myth of Sedan provided of it. It transformed history into a tool of the state, by which the state not only could, but should use the past in whatever form could prove most beneficial for the state. It destroyed the effort for objective history in Germany that was championed by historians like von Ranke and Delbrück. Finally, it created a reliance on convenient history rather than history itself, leaving Germany vulnerable for years to come. The myth of Sedan devastated Germany's history and its sense of reality, especially in the aftermath of the First World War. The Germans traded the truth for Schlieffen's mythology and lost something of themselves, their true history.

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