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“We Germans Fear God, and Nothing Else in the World!”: Military Policy in Wilhelmine  
Germany, 1890-1914

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of History  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in History

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by  
Cavender Steven Sutton  
May 2019

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Keywords: Imperial Germany, Military Policy, German Army, First World War

## ABSTRACT

“We Germans Fear God, and Nothing Else in the World!”: Military Policy in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1914

by

Cavender Steven Sutton

Throughout the Second Reich’s short life, military affairs were synonymous with those of the state. Indeed, it was the zeal and blood of Prussian soldiers that allowed the creation of a unified German empire. After solidifying itself as a major power, things grew more complicated as the Reich found itself increasingly surrounded by hostile rivals. To the west, French humiliation over their catastrophic defeat in 1870-71 continued to fester while, in the east, Russian sympathies for the new empire waned. The finalization of a Franco-Russian alliance in 1894 meant Germany faced formidable adversaries along her eastern and western borders. That unsettling realization dictated the empire’s military policy until its downfall in 1918. Drawing from the writings and speeches of Wilhelmine Germany’s military and political leaders, this work seeks to examine and analyze the Second Reich’s military policies and decision-making processes over the three decades preceding the First World War.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

On the afternoon of 6 February 1888, the German Reichstag was embroiled in debate. A new army spending bill was due for a vote. These bills were the subject of contentious deliberation that often spilled over into various other spheres of German governance. Questions regarding tax reform, imperialism, and the effects of rapid army expansion—and a subsequent debate concerning the merits of quality vs. quantity—permeated the political scene. These disputes also provided a platform for a radical new form of nationalism, manifested in the rise of political activist groups such as the Army League, the Navy League, and various organizations of veterans and reservists. These groups, rather unexpectedly, given their largely middle-class composition, had emerged as powerful and influential forces within German politics. They demanded radical increases in armaments that often went beyond what the War Ministry was willing to propose to the Reichstag. Conservative parliamentarians, on the one side, favored the proposed expansion of Germany's armed forces. Their opponents, most notably the Social Democrats, often opposed army expansion due to the entailing tax increases.<sup>1</sup>

Enter Otto von Bismarck. Although approaching his seventy-third birthday, the aging German Chancellor was still the same dynamic statesman who merged the various German states into a unified Reich seventeen years earlier. Quick-thinking, always strategically-minded, and a fiery orator, the Chancellor strolled onto the Reichstag floor to weigh in on the debate. A towering figure standing at 6'3" with piercing blue eyes and a thick walrus mustache, the old statesman held a commanding presence over the room as he ascended to the podium. Having

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Hughes and Richard L. DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 83-85.

spent the last two decades terminating and then recreating the geopolitical map of Europe, there was no one more fitting to give his interpretation of Germany's situation.

Bismarck began by discussing the increasingly polarized nature of European diplomacy. "Great complications and all kinds of coalitions, which no one can foresee, are constantly possible, and we must be prepared for them," he began, "We must be so strong, irrespective of momentary conditions, that we can face any coalition with the assurance of a great nation which is strong enough under circumstances to take her fate into her own hands." This was a pointed statement, no doubt aimed at his counterparts in Paris who were actively trying to undercut German diplomacy in Europe. When responding to these exertions, Bismarck counseled strength: "We must, to put it briefly, be as strong in these times as we possibly can be, and we can be stronger than any other nation of equal numbers in the world...it would be criminal if we were not to make use of our opportunity."

Bismarck then turned to the bill's financial implications. He dismissed the monetary burden the bill would impose on the German people and pointed to France, which he stated spent nearly three times as much on armaments as Germany had in recent years. He insisted a modest tax increase was a small price to pay when national survival was at stake. Then, the Chancellor addressed Germany's strategic predicament: "When I say that it is our duty to endeavor to be ready at all times and for all emergencies, I imply that we must make greater exertions than other people for the same purpose, because of our geographical position. We are situated in the heart of Europe, and have at least three fronts open to attack... We are also more exposed to the dangers of a coalition than any other nation, as is proved by the whole development of history, by our geographical position, and the lesser degree of cohesiveness."

The situation, it seemed, was growing dire. Indeed, since the creation of the German Empire, Bismarck had dedicated his life to preserving his new state's hegemony and the delicate peace which followed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. He did so by establishing diplomatic links with every major western state except France, whose festering humiliation from their defeat in 1871 led to a culture of *revanche* that aimed to restore France's honor and reclaim the territories of Alsace and Lorraine the Germans seized as part of the 1871 peace settlement. This predicament was all too clear to Bismarck. "God has placed us where we are prevented, thanks to our neighbors, from growing lazy and dull. He has placed by our side the most warlike and restless of all nations, the French, and He has permitted warlike inclinations to grow strong in Russia, where formerly they existed to a lesser degree." Germany, it seemed, was being encircled by indignant rivals with malicious intentions. "The pikes in the European carp-pond are keeping us from being carps by making us feel their teeth on both sides," he continued, "They also are forcing us to an exertion which without them we might not make, and to a union among us Germans, which is abhorrent to us at heart...But we must respond to the intentions of Providence by making ourselves so strong that the pikes can do nothing but encourage us."

Hitting his stride, Bismarck lamented the threats and other subversions aimed against Germany. He also made clear that the gathering storm clouds offered opportunity. "By nature we are rather tending away, the one from the other. But the Franco-Russian Press within which we are squeezed compels us to hold together, and by pressure our cohesive force is greatly increased." Amidst constant interjections of "Bravo!" and "Hear, hear!" Bismarck's words became more pointed. "We cannot afford to lose this factor of preeminence if many military men—not only ours but others as well—believe that today we are superior to our future

opponents...If any of our opponents by any chance are thinking that we are pacific because we are afraid of how the war may end, they are mightily mistaken.”

“It is not fear, therefore, which makes us pacific,” Bismarck continued, now raising his voice, “but the consciousness of our strength...*We Germans*,” he thundered, “*fear God, and nothing else in the world!*” to which he received booming, resounding applause. Despite the din, the fiery Chancellor continued: “It is this fear of God which makes us love and cherish peace. If in spite of this anybody breaks the peace, he will discover that the ardent patriotism of 1813, which called to the standards the entire population of Prussia...has today become the common property of the whole German nation. Attack the German nation anywhere, and you will find it armed to a man, and every man with the firm belief in his heart: God will be with us!”<sup>2</sup>

It was a speech for the ages, and one of the defining moments of Bismarck’s illustrious career. Within his words we see a microcosm of Wilhelmine Germany’s military policy as a whole. Bismarck, unknowingly, outlined the path the German military would take over the next three decades. He proposes the Germans confront their unfavorable strategic position by raising enough forces to deter foreign aggression. He speaks of mobilizing the entire population for war, as Prussia had done against Napoleon seventy-five years prior, and he refers to historical examples of Germany’s military supremacy to buttress the idea that its people can overcome any threat. These three pillars—an armaments policy based on deterrence, cultural mobilization of the German populace, and a remarkable case of hubris based on national memory—would dictate Germany’s military policy after Bismarck’s impending departure from office. This work seeks to analyze each of these pillars while arguing that, while mutually supportive, each was plagued by lofty expectations and internal friction. Moreover, the Second Reich’s military policy was hardly

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<sup>2</sup> Otto von Bismarck, “We Germans fear God, and nothing else in the world!” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed May 12, 2018. [http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=2825](http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=2825)

belligerent in the sense of seeking territorial expansion in Europe. In the three decades preceding the First World War, Germany's military leaders acted largely in response to its neighbors' actions. Rather than an aggressive, expansionist organism which set the standard of European militarism, it was a reactive system dictated by Germany's unfavorable strategic situation and an increasingly hostile conglomeration of national rivals.

A mere thirty-one years after Bismarck delivered this rousing speech, however, the German Empire became one of the First World War's millions of casualties. What had gone so terribly wrong? As with many crucial moments in history, Bismarck's speech met mixed interpretations. His words about the Germans' indefatigable courage, their proud history of standing against foreign aggression, and the desire to build a state powerful enough to deter future transgressions pulled at the heart strings of even the most modest of German nationalists. His promise of a swift, violent reaction to any who dare march on Germany reinforces the common interpretation that Bismarck intended to ignite the passions of the German people to prepare them for a future conflict. His speech, then, did as much to mobilize martial passions as it did to assuage uneasy minds.

What many German nationalists in the late nineteenth century did not understand was that Bismarck's speech was also a stern warning to German war hawks. Predictably, most political and military leaders overlooked the fact that, minutes before making his famous declaration, the Chancellor also issued a warning: "To sum up: I do not believe in an immediate interruption of peace, and I ask you to discuss this bill independently of such a thought or apprehension, looking upon it as a means of making the great strength which God has placed in the German nation fully available. If we do not need all the troops, it is not necessary to summon

them. We are trying to avoid the contingency when we shall need them.”<sup>3</sup> These are not the words of a man who believes Germany should assert her power solely through military action. Bismarck, knowing he was approaching the end of his days, was pleading for his countrymen to show restraint in the future. Unfortunately, many in the succeeding generation of German leaders did not comprehend his warnings or the situation’s complexity. The years following the Chancellor’s death saw dramatic shifts in European diplomacy which created a world that was increasingly hostile to Germany. As the Second Reich’s leadership maneuvered in response, its military policy adopted increasingly lofty objectives and became correspondingly erratic. Bismarck’s predictions came true, but Germany was unable to meet the subsequent challenges.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER 2

### THE RISE OF PRUSSIA

The German Empire was not a natural creation. Rather, it was the product of dynamic, sometimes sinister ambitions, diplomatic strong-arming, and military conquest. Its story begins with the improbable rise of Prussia from a small duchy of little importance to a major European Power. Like the Second Reich, the Prussian kingdom's creation was not a natural event—it was a gradual coalescence brought on by centuries of diplomacy and war. The kingdom that would one day rule the heart of Europe came from the humblest of beginnings. Its genesis came when the House of Hohenzollern purchased the small duchy of Brandenburg in 1415. The region had no discernable features. Centered on the city of Berlin, the duchy occupied a desolate patch of ground encompassing a mere 40,000 square kilometers. There were no raw materials for mining and its sandy soil made for poor farming. Militarily speaking, Brandenburg was almost impossible to secure as its landlocked, low-lying position offered no defensible terrain of any kind.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Brandenburg-Prussia became known as “the Mark,” a description derived from the German word for “marchlands.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite its unenviable economic and geographic features—or, more likely, because of them—the principality displayed an insatiable appetite for expansion. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it made consistent, albeit modest, territorial acquisitions. There was no standing army; the principality instead elected to use an antiquated feudal levy system for defense. Prussia's acts of expansion were thus conducted through marriage, diplomacy, and

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 1-3.

<sup>2</sup> Robert M. Citino. *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2005), 2.

purchases rather than military conquest.<sup>3</sup> Later, in the early seventeenth century, Prussian territory was one of many unfortunate enough to witness the savagery and destruction brought on by the Thirty Years' War. That experience left a deep impression on its future leaders, notably Elector Frederick William. "The Great Elector," as he would later be known, assumed the throne in 1640, when Brandenburg was under occupation by a marauding army of Swedes. He brokered a temporary agreement with the occupiers the following year, but it carried little weight. The pillaging and devastation continued, forcing the Elector to flee to Königsberg in East Prussia. He returned to Berlin in 1643 and found the city in a pitiful state—immersed in squalor, its population depleted, and most of its buildings burned or in a perilous state of disrepair.

The scene shocked Frederick William, so much so that he vowed to never again allow a foreign invader to march on Prussian lands unchecked. He immediately set out to eliminate the chief reason Prussia had failed to halt foreign incursions—its lack of a proficient standing army. Over the next thirty years, the Great Elector expanded his army from a mere 3,000 in 1641 to 38,000 in 1670.<sup>4</sup> However, in Frederick William's view, simply possessing a large army would not be enough to ensure Prussian security. He therefore sought to use that army to assert his power, first in border conflicts with the kingdoms of Poland-Lithuania and then Sweden, and later by selling its services to the highest bidder during the numerous European wars of the late seventeenth century. In almost every case, the Prussian army outperformed its counterparts and adversaries alike, gaining it a reputation as one of the most dependable in all of Europe.<sup>5</sup> By the end of Frederick William's reign, Prussia's standing among the courts of Europe was tied to that of its army—it would remain that way for another two and a half centuries.

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<sup>3</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 5-15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-3.

<sup>5</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, 6-11, 29-33.

As a state, Prussia finally elevated itself from Electorate to Kingdom in 1701, when Elector Frederick III was crowned King in Prussia—henceforth known as King Frederick I. This elevation is significant, not only because it raised Prussia to a higher geopolitical status, but because Frederick I secured his ascension by pledging to supply a contingent of 8,000 troops to assist the Habsburg empire in the War of the Spanish Succession.<sup>6</sup> While Prussia’s military contribution to the Habsburg cause was nominal—and it remained so throughout the conflict—the context in which Prussian soldiers marched to war cannot be understated. Once again, albeit indirectly, the Prussian army had been used to advance Prussian interests, in this case by securing the coronation of its first king. It was a decision the Habsburgs would later regret, as it greatly enhanced the manner in which the small kingdom could expand its power. As the eighteenth century progressed, Habsburg Austria came to realize that, for the first time in nearly five centuries, its hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe had a serious challenger.

The inevitable reckoning between Austria and Prussia began in 1740. In that year the Habsburg Emperor, Charles VI, died without a male heir. His daughter Maria Teresa, just twenty-three years old and pregnant with her fourth child, assumed the throne. Her ascension created immense problems in Germany. For centuries, the Holy Roman Empire ruled German lands from Vienna. During that time the titles of Emperor of Austria and of the Holy Roman Empire were generally one in the same. By law, however, a woman could not be crowned Holy Roman Emperor, meaning the new empress of Austria would have to find a suitable replacement to wear the Holy Roman crown. Sensing weakness, the vultures of Europe began to circle, and the War of the Austrian Succession began.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 71.

<sup>7</sup> Dennis Showalter. *Frederick the Great: A Military History* (London: Frontline Books, 2016), 38-40.

Prussia would not remain idle in the conflict. Nor would it take up arms for the house that had granted Frederick I his kingdom thirty-nine years prior, for Prussia, too, had a new monarch. Twenty-eight-year-old King Frederick II, who would later be known as “Frederick the Great,” had taken the Prussian throne after his father, Frederick William I, died earlier that year. The new king was a complex man with a difficult past. Despite being raised in the majestic courts of Berlin, young Frederick endured a tortuous childhood. Much to his father’s chagrin, he had never wanted to be a soldier. Rather, Frederick was a dreamer and a lover of intellect, spending his youth fixated on poetry, philosophy, art, and music. His father, a daft, brutish authoritarian who dubbed himself “The Soldier-King,” hated his son’s intellectual obsessions. He tortured young Frederick, driving him to attempt an escape to France at age eighteen. Frederick was caught, thrown in prison, and spared the hangman’s noose only when his father sentenced his friend Hans Hermann von Katte, a young Prussian lieutenant and accomplice to Frederick’s attempted flight, to die in his stead.<sup>8</sup>

It comes as no surprise that Frederick harbored intense resentment toward his father even after his death. It is within this context that Frederick sought to expand Prussian power in a way his father never dared. Arguably the best thing Frederick William I ever did for his son was to leave him an army of 80,000 superbly trained troops and an impressive war chest. Young Frederick decided to use the most potent tool at his disposal, the Prussian army, to accomplish his objective. In December 1740, Frederick led his army into Silesia—a lucrative Austrian province containing fertile farmland, substantial industry, and 1.5 million inhabitants—and seized it.<sup>9</sup> The operation went well for Frederick, who wasted no time in demonstrating his abilities as a field commander as well as the Prussian army’s superiority over its Austrian

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<sup>8</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 103-8.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 190.

counterpart. He scored several victories in 1741 and 1742, forcing Maria Teresa to sue for peace in the latter year. Hostilities resumed in 1744, but the Prussian army's skill on the field and the strain of fighting on multiple fronts quickly wore down Hapsburg forces. Austria formally ceded Silesia to Prussia and made peace with Frederick in 1745.<sup>10</sup>

Maria Teresa never forgave Frederick for his audacity. After making peace with the Prussian king, she successfully staved off Austria's other attackers and the War of the Austrian Succession ended in 1748. With her place on the throne secured, Maria Teresa turned her focus to domestic reforms, but retaking Silesia remained in the back of her mind nonetheless. Her chance came with the outbreak of the Seven Years' War in 1756. However, Frederick again struck first. Seeing trouble on the horizon, he marched his armies into Bohemia in April 1757, defeating the Austrian army standing between him and Prague and then besieging the city. Although Frederick soon abandoned the siege, he would spend the next two years creating havoc for his enemies, most notably in late 1758 when, in rapid succession, he destroyed two armies that numbered far more than his own—a French army at Rossbach on 5 November and an Austrian army at Leuthen on 5 December. Fortune turned against Frederick in the following years yet, no matter how many times the Prussian king was on the brink of defeat, he managed to pull himself together, raise more forces, and fight on. For seven agonizing years he resisted the combined might of the Austrian, French, and Russian empires and prevailed. The Treaty of Hubertusburg, signed 15 February 1763, reaffirmed Prussian control over Silesia and solidified her hegemony in Northern Europe. Frederick the Great, once a young dreamer with no desire to soldier, successfully used the Prussian army to expand his kingdom and assert its status as one of Europe's great powers.

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<sup>10</sup> An excellent account of Frederick's actions in the War of the Austrian Succession can be found in Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 38-83.

## **Prussia in the Age of Revolution**

For Europe, the long nineteenth century was one of upheaval and revolution. For Prussia, it was one of peaks and valleys. Despite its substantial expansion of territory and power in the previous century, mighty Prussia could not escape the trials that accompanied Europe's Age of Revolution. To begin with, the kingdom entered the century on shaky ground. On the one hand, Prussia possessed a firm grasp on a large swath of territory due to its victories in the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War, as well as the recent partitions of Poland. On the other, Prussia was diplomatically and militarily isolated, having allied itself with and later abandoned every major European power during the French Revolutionary Wars.<sup>11</sup>

As the century's first decade progressed, her position only worsened. It further deteriorated when Prussia entered the struggle against Napoleon in 1806. Her soldiers first met Napoleon's forces at Jena and Auerstädt and were defeated on 14 October. It was a black day when, according to Robert Citino, "The army of Frederick the Great...one that had managed even during its defeats to maintain a reputation for invincibility, collapsed in a single short day of battle. As two twin streams of refugees, one from each of the defeats, crashed into one another on the high road to Weimar, something that had rarely been seen even in the darkest days of the Seven Years' War now suddenly made its appearance: panic."<sup>12</sup> Dark times followed. Prussia's army, its most distinguishing feature and most effective instrument of foreign policy, was shattered. King Frederick William III, broken and humiliated by Napoleon, was forced to cede significant portions of Prussian territory, in addition to providing Napoleon's army with 12,000

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<sup>11</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 286-94.

<sup>12</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, 104.

men, in the Peace of Tilsit, signed 9 July 1807.<sup>13</sup> It seemed Prussia was finished as a major power.

For the next five years, Prussia remained dormant while Napoleon rampaged across Europe, annexing territory and creating loyal satellite states at will. Many of Prussia's most talented generals, including Carl von Clausewitz—who would later author *On War*, one of the most influential treatises ever written about modern warfare—refused to give up the fight against Napoleon, instead traveling to Russia and offering their services to the Czar's army. Fortune turned against Napoleon in his ill-fated invasion of Russia in 1812 yet, despite the *Grande Armée's* virtual destruction on Russia's frozen steppes, Frederick William III remained impotent. Ironically, it was through an act of insubordination that the Prussian army began to rebuild itself under the direction of several renegade officers who defied their king's orders to honor the alliance with France mandated in the Peace of Tilsit. The revival began on 20 December 1812, when Russian troops, pursuing the *Grande Armée's* tattered remnants, approached the East Prussian frontier. According to the Peace of Tilsit, Prussian forces in the area were obligated to confront the Russian advance and buy time for Napoleon's troops to continue their retreat. The Russian commander, however, had a trump card in the form of Carl von Clausewitz, who he sent to negotiate with Prussian General Ludwig Yorck, the commander in East Prussia. Yorck, a staunch supporter of his king (so much so that he begrudgingly took part in the *Grand Armée's* Russian campaign earlier that year, as required by the Tilsit treaty), was convinced by the young Clausewitz's vigor and conviction. In a bold act of insubordination, Yorck declared he and his men would no longer support the French cause and would allow the Russians to pursue Napoleon's forces into East Prussia unimpeded.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 308-10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 358-9.

Frederick William III was outraged by his general's insolence. Yorck was formally stripped of his office and a warrant was issued for his arrest. These reprisals had no effect, however, for by February 1813 Frederick William III—essentially a French hostage in Berlin, from which he continued to demand his military remain patient and show restraint—had lost control of events in East Prussia. Meanwhile Yorck, knowing his actions had pushed him past any discernable point of return, doubled-down on his defiance. A collection of prominent landowners and merchants took it upon themselves to organize a provisional governing body which they dubbed the “representatives of the nation.” They first met in the great hall of the House of the Provincial Estates in Königsberg on 5 February. Yorck, who had never possessed a flair for the dramatic, made a brief speech to the assembly, urging them to form a committee to oversee war preparations and to raise an army to liberate Prussian lands. In closing, he declared: “I hope to fight the French wherever I find them. I count on everyone's support; if their strength outweighs ours, we will know how to die with honor.” Yorck's declaration was met with thunderous applause, to which the general raised his hand to silence the assembly, before saying “There is no call for that on a battlefield!”<sup>15</sup>

Yorck then left the hall, after which the Estates agreed to raise a provincial militia (the *Landwehr*) of 20,000 men with 10,000 reserves. Quickly raising such a force would require conscription. To bolster the ranks, the assembly voted to abolish exemptions allowed under the old cantonal system—regardless of social status or religion, all adult males up to age forty-five were eligible for the draft; only clergymen and school teachers would be exempt from service. Seemingly overnight, a new army emerged as conscripts and volunteers alike flocked to the colors. The ideal of the nation at arms, as described by Bismarck on the Reichstag floor exactly

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 360.

seventy-five years later, had come to fruition. Moreover, the Prussian army's self-reclamation and the accompanying explosion of patriotism among the citizenry forced Frederick William III into action. By March 1813, even the king's most cautious and sycophantic advisors warned him of the dire consequences that would accompany further inaction. Knowing the "general will of the nation" demanded war against France, and fearing revolution if he failed to act, Frederick William announced Prussia's break with France on 17 March and a week later announced his intention to expel Napoleon from Germany.<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, it had been the Prussian army, a traditional symbol of unquestioned obedience to the monarchy, that ignited the ensuing Wars of Liberation by openly defying its king.

The Prussian army's return to ascendancy did not come without growing pains, however. The new army first went into combat at Lützen and Bautzen in May 1813. In both cases, Prusso-Russian forces were defeated and fell back in disorder. They had been lucky—many historians agree with Napoleon's assessment that it was his lack of cavalry, the arm that suffered the most attrition in the previous year's debacle in Russia, that prevented the French Emperor from pursuing and destroying his foe—however, there were signs the new Prussian army was coming into its own. Its formations were more flexible, more tenacious, and displayed an ability to impose a great deal of punishment on its enemy.<sup>17</sup> Despite forcing his enemies from the field on both occasions, Napoleon's victories had cost him 22,000 killed and wounded to 8,500 Prussians and 3,000 Russians at Lützen and another 22,000 casualties At Bautzen, where Prusso-Russian forces again lost around 10,000 men.<sup>18</sup> "These animals," an exasperated Napoleon declared, "have learned something."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 361-3.

<sup>17</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, 132.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 365.

<sup>19</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, 132.

Fortune continued to turn against Napoleon. The following autumn, his forces were routed in the Battle of Leipzig, where two multi-national coalitions (Prussian, Austrian, Russian, and Swedish armies opposed Napoleon's French forces while varying contingents of German troops served on both sides) squared off in a four-day slugfest that would decide the fate of central Europe. At Leipzig and in ensuing battles, the Prussians established themselves as the most aggressive troops in the coalition, its soldiers displaying levels of initiative, capability, and zeal that were unmatched.<sup>20</sup> This performance persisted for the rest of the war. When Napoleon made his final stand at Waterloo in June 1815, the Prussians' actions ensured allied victory. Indeed, it was Prussian forces under Count Friedrich von Bülow who smashed Napoleon's right flank in the early afternoon, and it was General Zieten's 1<sup>st</sup> Army corps that arrived to reinforce Wellington's endangered left in the early evening, allowing the British commander to transfer reinforcements to vulnerable sections in his center that had been badly mauled during the day's fighting. Meanwhile, Bülow's men continued their advance, fighting off repeated counterattacks and threatening Napoleon's rear. The French forces, now greatly outnumbered and dispirited, broke and fled in the twilight.<sup>21</sup>

At long last, Napoleon was vanquished, though the victory had not come easy. The decade preceding Napoleon's demise was one of the most trying times in the Prussian army's illustrious history—even more so than the tribulations witnessed in the Seven Years' War. It was humiliated in 1806 and virtually abolished in 1807. In 1812 it had been forced to fight under its greatest nemesis in his ill-fated venture into the Russian wasteland. But, at the end of that debacle, the Prussian army regained the tenacity and zeal that had made it one of Europe's most formidable fighting forces in the previous century. Devoid of assertive leadership and sensing an

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 134-8.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 372.

opportunity to reverse Prussia's fortunes and reclaim her hegemony in Northern Europe, a collection of renegade commanders took it upon themselves to defy their king, resurrect their army, and lead it in an all-or-nothing campaign to rid their homeland of the man who had so humiliated them six years' prior. It was the Prussian soldier, Prussian tenacity, Prussian iron, and Prussian blood that expelled the French from Germany and brought about Napoleon's demise.

Napoleon's defeat in 1815 began a fifty-four-year period of peace within Germany. Peace, however, did not ensure stability, for new forces were at work within Europe's social and political fabric. The next crisis to confront Prussia would not be embodied in a foreign army or a rival monarch who sought Prussia's destruction. Rather, the threat came from within. Throughout the 1840s, political dissent began to crescendo across all of Europe. The intensifying social crises created a myriad of problems with which traditional mechanisms of administration and governance were ill-suited to contend. In the Prussian case, much of the citizenry's qualms were the result of unfulfilled promises. A rare light in the darkness that was the Napoleonic occupation was embodied in a bold system of domestic reforms enacted by enlightened ministers like Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein and Karl August von Hardenburg. The reforms had two primary objectives. The first sought to convert Prussia from an antiquated, semi-feudal land into a modern state while the second aimed to forge a new Prussian patriotism in order to fully mobilize its citizenry for war—similar to the patriotic vigor harnessed by revolutionary France's *levée en masse*. The reformers sought to accomplish these objectives by making Prussia's people into citizens, rather than subjects, who had a stake in defending the kingdom. Serfdom was abolished, self-government was granted to towns and villages, and elected town councils replaced royal appointees. It was a true revolution from above in which the reformers hoped to

avoid the widespread violence that accompanied social change during the French Revolution.<sup>22</sup> In an attempt to bolster public support after his feeble showing in early 1813, Frederick William III promised a constitution for Prussia. When he died in July 1840, that promise was still unfulfilled.<sup>23</sup>

Frederick William IV next assumed the throne. Politically speaking, 1840 was not an ideal time to head the Prussian state. The forces of nationalism and liberalism were spurning the lower and middle classes to action, each demanding a written constitution and the right to elect representatives to decide the manner in which they were governed. On the right, hardline conservatives hoped the new king would take a reactionary stance and institute repressive domestic policies.<sup>24</sup> In Frederick William's first seven years on the throne, both would be disappointed. On the one hand, Frederick William IV was both a devout Lutheran and an ardent supporter of religious tolerance. He advocated acceptance of all religions in his kingdom, but did little to support, let alone address, growing demands for a popular legislature.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, Frederick William IV sought to rebuild Hohenzollern prestige and vowed to expand Prussian power in a way his predecessor never could. The new king was adamant about preserving the monarchy, yet he did not seek to do so through political channels. Initially, he chose to avoid political infighting and instead focused on enhancing the institution that had so effectively asserted Prussian power over the last two centuries: the army. The result was a military reform movement that would last from the early 1840s until after Frederick William IV's death in 1861. During this time, the Prussian army greatly expanded its numbers, refined its

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<sup>22</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, 128-9.

<sup>23</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 436.

<sup>24</sup> Dennis Showalter. *The Wars of German Unification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 437-45.

tactical doctrine and operational philosophy, overhauled its training system, and became the first army to adopt a breach-loading rifle as its standard infantry weapon.<sup>26</sup>

While his military reforms were largely successful, the aloofness with which Frederick William IV approached his state's ever divided political climate did little to stem the rising calls for democratization. It is difficult to determine what long-term strategy, if any, the king chose to take in regard to the growing levels of social upheaval. No matter what his intentions may have been, it is clear that when mass revolution swept over Europe in 1848, Prussia, too, was destined to be immersed in turmoil. Naturally, the revolutionary epicenter was Paris. In February 1848, the French rose up against King Louis Philippe, who abdicated soon after. News of the French king's resignation reached Berlin on 28 February. Thousands filled the city's streets—some seeking to foment insurrection, others simply hoping to learn more information. Over the next two weeks, Berlin descended into chaos, its people staging protests, constructing barricades, and harassing the king's troops. Dissidence then gave way to violence, as revolutionaries positioned on rooftops dropped rocks and tiles onto passing soldiers, who in turn opened fire on barricades and buildings suspected of harboring the attackers.

In a curious turn of events, the king then chose to place himself in the revolutionaries' hands. It was a bold decision that, in retrospect, proved to be the correct one as it prevented further violence and allowed a semblance of peace and order to return to the city.<sup>27</sup> After the army's departure, the king consented to several of the revolutionaries' demands, including a written constitution, freedom of the press, and the creation of a national assembly. From its inception, political infighting plagued the new assembly. No doubt a portent of things to come, the body paralyzed itself on nearly every proposal, including their attempts to draft a Prussian

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<sup>26</sup> Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*, 13-8.

<sup>27</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 469-75.

constitution.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, the king consented to a monarchist constitution that included a feckless bicameral legislature. In an odd concession, the new constitution was constructed and then circulated by the crown and not by an elected assembly. What is more surprising is that the compromise was widely accepted by a majority of liberals and moderate conservatives alike. Although the political concessions granted in the constitution were but a shell of those originally pursued by the revolutionary movement, it is clear those concessions had long-term implications. “The Prussian upheavals of 1848,” writes Christopher Clark, “were a watershed between an old world and a new. The decade that began in March 1848 witness a profound transformation in political and administrative practices, a ‘revolution in government.’”<sup>29</sup>

### **Forging an Empire: The World Bismarck Destroyed**

The new brand of political and administrative practice became all too clear after Frederick William IV died in 1861. His brother and successor, William I, was also determined to expand Prussian power in Germany. William also saw the value in possessing a strong military arm if these goals were to be realized. “Whoever wants to govern Germany,” he wrote shortly before taking the throne, “must conquer it first...Whether the time for this unification has come, God alone knows; but that Prussia is destined to stand at the summit of Germany is an underlying fact in of our history. But when and how? That is the question.”<sup>30</sup> Unlike Frederick William IV, his successor quickly grew disillusioned with the new constitutional system. He certainly had his struggles with the system’s legislature. The political fight came to a head in 1861 when, in a bid to create a more conservative parliament, William dissolved the legislature and called for new elections. His gambled failed. At year’s end over 100 parliamentary seats

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 472-80.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 501-2.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 514.

were filled by progressives while conservatives friendly to the monarchy held only fifteen. The new chamber, even less willing to pass William's military reforms, was dissolved the following spring. That bid for a more favorable legislature fared little better than the first—the elections in May 1862 resulted in another insurmountable liberal majority.<sup>31</sup> Legislative deadlock persisted.

It was in this context that an exasperated William I summoned Otto von Bismarck on 22 September 1862. Bismarck was a monarchist in the strictest sense. "By the customary law of Prussia," he once wrote, "which has not been materially altered by the Constitution, the King rules, not his ministers. It is only legislative, not governmental functions that are shared with the Chambers, before which the King is represented by the ministers."<sup>32</sup> He did little to conceal his feelings regarding monarchy and democratization. It is little wonder, then, why William summoned him to his court when he did and, more importantly, why he installed Bismarck as Minister President of Prussia. Bismarck was the king's ace in the hole; a shrewd, ruthless politician and staunch monarchist that would restore power to the monarchy and allow William to proceed with his plans for Germany.

Bismarck wasted little time. The next week, on 30 September, came the first of many renowned moments in his career. While attending a meeting of the parliament's budget commission, Bismarck made clear his feelings about the committee, parliament, and the constitution: "There was talk about the 'sobriety' of the Prussian people. Yes, the great independence of the individual makes it difficult in Prussia to govern with the constitution... Furthermore we are perhaps too 'well-educated' to support a constitution; we are too critical; the ability to assess government measures and records of the public assess government measures and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 516.

<sup>32</sup> Otto Fürst von Bismarck. *The memoirs, being the reflections and reminiscences of Otto, Prince von Bismarck, written and dictated by himself after his retirement from office* (New York: H. Fertig, 1966), Two Vols, Vol I. Translated by A.J. Butler, 361.

records of the public assembly is too common... This may sound paradoxical, but everything proves how hard constitutional life is in Prussia.”<sup>33</sup> Then, he presented his view of the stance Prussia should assume going forward: “Germany is not looking to Prussia’s liberalism, but to its power; Bavaria, Württemberg, Baden may indulge liberalism, and yet no one will assign them Prussia’s role; Prussia has to coalesce and concentrate its power for the opportune moment, which has already been missed several times... it is not by speeches and majority resolutions that the great questions of the time are decided—that was the big mistake of 1848 and 1849—but by iron and blood.”<sup>34</sup>

In this speech, Bismarck was rather pointed in his intentions: the time where Prussia attempted to strengthen its position through diplomacy was over. She would use her army to gain hegemony over the Germans lands. Moreover, he was also reacting to the reasons for the failure of German unity during the 1848 revolutions—the intervention of outside powers such as Britain and Russia. Bismarck’s central contention was that the grand speeches at the Frankfurt Parliament had not achieved unification because they were ultimately rendered pointless by real power. Thus, it was actual material—in this case, military—power that would be needed to unify Germany, given that creating a unified, powerful state in the center of Europe would upset the traditional balances of power outlined in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and, more recently, the Congress of Vienna after Napoleon’s defeat in 1815. Both conventions established a balance of power based on a weak, disunited Germany. A successful campaign of Unification would mean Europe’s great powers would have a strong, united German state in the heart of Europe with

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<sup>33</sup> Otto von Bismarck. “Excerpt from Bismarck’s ‘Blood and Iron’ Speech (1862).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed February 8, 2019. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=250](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=250)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

which to contend. It was their likely reaction that Bismarck had in mind when he made his speech.

Bismarck's subsequent actions leave little doubt that he meant precisely what he said on that contentious September day. Over the next eight years, he engineered three wars with Denmark, Austria, and France in 1864, 1866, and 1870-1, respectively—a series of conflicts that would come to be known as the Wars of German Unification. The first began over the semi-independent, Danish-controlled duchies of Schleswig and Holstein. The southernmost portion of Denmark's territory, the duchies were predominantly German-speaking and had substantial pro-German sects. In early 1863, a loose coalition of liberals and German nationalists in the duchies demanded separation and a constitution. Bismarck seized upon the opportunity and turned the dispute into an international crisis. Things grew more complicated when the Danish king, Frederick VII, died suddenly and without a direct heir.<sup>35</sup> His eventual successor, Duke Christian of Augustenburg, quickly asserted a dynastic claim over the duchies and, in signing the November Constitution of 1863, pledged to fully annex them into the Danish state.<sup>36</sup>

For Bismarck, the dispute offered a perfect opportunity. Acquiring the duchies for Prussia would strengthen its geopolitical position and deliver a badly needed foreign policy triumph. Painting itself as a champion of the German cause, Prussia pledged to help.<sup>37</sup> Austria, which could not afford to allow Prussia to maintain the spectacle that she was the lone defender of the German cause, offered her support. On 16 January 1864, the two nations issued a joint ultimatum to Denmark: suspend the November Constitution or face military action. Their demand, similar to the ultimatum issued to Serbia in July 1914, was meant to be rejected. It was, and in February

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<sup>35</sup> Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*, 117-8.

<sup>36</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 523-4.

<sup>37</sup> Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*, 119.

1864 Austrian and Prussian troops marched into Holstein.<sup>38</sup> The campaign had its trying moments, but for the most part it was easy going for Austro-Prussian forces. They quickly overran the duchies and forced an armistice in April. Fighting resumed when negotiations broke down in June, but the following month saw another string of Danish defeats. On 1 August, Christian admitted defeat and ceded control of Schleswig and Holstein to Prussia and Austria.<sup>39</sup>

Despite a quick and relatively easy victory, Bismarck was not done with the duchies or with Austria. He provoked another dispute by demanding control over both duchies in exchange for military support against France. Austria, no doubt sensing that continued appeasement toward Prussia would signal an acknowledgement that her hegemony in Germany was eroding, refused. The two managed to compromise, but Austrian suspicion of Prussia intensified nonetheless.<sup>40</sup> Bismarck then turned his attention outward, first by convincing Emperor Napoleon III of France to stay out of German affairs and then by drafting a secret treaty with King Emmanuel of Italy, in which Prussia would grant Italy Austrian-controlled Venice in exchange for military support in a future conflict with Vienna.<sup>41</sup>

The stage was set for the next confrontation; now Bismarck needed a *casus belli*. Prussia created one when its troops occupied Holstein, an Austrian domain per the 1864 agreement, in June 1866. On 11 June, the Austrian ambassador to the German Confederation called for mobilization of all German states against Berlin. Several refused, emboldening Bismarck to instruct his ambassador to declare the confederation dissolved and to present a detailed plan for a new one that excluded Austria before exiting the chamber. Then, on 15 June, he issued simultaneous ultimatums to the states which refused to side with Prussia—join the new

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 124-32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 133-5.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 533.

confederation or face military action. When they refused, Prussian troops crossed their frontiers the following day.<sup>42</sup> The Austro-Prussian War, the second of the Wars of German Unification, had begun.

For Prussia, victory would come faster and easier than it had in 1864. In the north, Prussian forces initially stumbled against Hanoverian troops but quickly recovered their momentum. In the south, Prussian forces under Helmuth von Moltke—father of the Prussian General Staff and uncle to the future leader of German forces in their 1914 invasion of France—won a series of victories against the Austrians that were so lopsided they often saw four or five Austrian casualties for every Prussian.<sup>43</sup> The war's climactic battle occurred at Königgrätz on 3 July. The battle, engineered by Moltke, was a tactical and operational masterpiece. In a single day of fighting, Austria suffered over 44,000 casualties—including 20,000 prisoners—while Prussia lost 9,000 men.<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that Moltke benefitted to a degree from Austrian incompetence and a stroke of luck, however his triumph at Königgrätz sealed Austria's fate nonetheless. Less than three weeks later, on 22 July, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria conceded defeat—the war was over a mere seven weeks after it had begun.<sup>45</sup> Franz Joseph's capitulation was a pivotal moment, one that marked the end of centuries of Austrian dominance over the German-speaking lands in central and northern Europe. Bismarck, using the Prussian army as an instrument of foreign policy, had finally secured Prussian hegemony in Germany.

Prussia's rapid, decisive victory over Austria sent shockwaves throughout Europe. Seemingly overnight, the traditional foundations on which great power relations were built had vanished. The shock was most intense in France, whose foreign policy in Germany had for

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<sup>42</sup> Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*, 159-60.

<sup>43</sup> Citino, *German Way of War*, 163.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 542.

centuries concentrated on—and benefitted from—keeping the German peoples fragmented and thus preventing France from having a strong, unified state with which to contend along her extensive eastern border. The French cabinet, stunned by the outcome at Königgrätz and Austria’s humiliating defeat, demanded that Emperor Napoleon III take immediate action. Many demanded he declare war on Prussia. He declined, instead issuing a demand that Prussia honor the “borders of 1814”—a reference to the traditional claim that French territory extended to the Rhine’s western banks. Bismarck knew accepting the demand would undermine Prussia’s newly won influence. He called Napoleon’s bluff and rejected his demand, correctly assuming the French emperor would not declare war in response.<sup>46</sup>

Bismarck’s rejection put Napoleon III, nephew of the same Napoleon whose armies overran most of Europe after the turn of the nineteenth century, in a precarious position. He had come to power democratically when he was elected President of France in December 1848. He completed his four-year term with high levels of approval amongst the middle and working classes, however the Second Republic’s constitution limited the presidency to a single term. In December 1851, Louis Napoleon, as he was known before his coronation, and a collection of loyal generals implemented a military coup. His loyalists met only sporadic resistance and the uprising was successful. The Republic was dissolved, after which Louis Napoleon proclaimed himself Napoleon III, Emperor of France.<sup>47</sup>

Initially, the new emperor was quite popular. Like his uncle, Napoleon III bolstered his popularity through military action—first in Crimea in 1854-6, then by helping Piedmont-Sardinia expel Austrian forces from northern Italy in 1859. A series of policy failures—most notably a

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<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey Wawro. *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 16-7.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

failed military expedition to Mexico—caused public opinion to shift against the French emperor in the following years.<sup>48</sup> By the late 1860s, the popularity that secured Napoleon III's grip on France had disappeared. Remaining impotent after Prussia rejected his demands in 1866 made matters worse—and Louis Napoleon knew it. Thus, he entered 1870 with the belief that war against Prussia would be beneficial. If successful, military action would check Prussian power, help rebuild his popularity within France, and rebuild his prestige on the global stage. Bismarck, too, believed Prussia would benefit from an armed conflict with France.<sup>49</sup> It would further strengthen Prussian dominance in Central Europe and, by displaying its military capability against a first-rate military power, make a case for Prussian hegemony on the continent—the latter of which would, as we shall see, convince the remaining German states to unite with Prussia to form a single German Empire.

An opportunity presented itself when the Spanish throne was vacated in 1868. The following year, a Spanish agent approached King William I's nephew, Prince Leopold, to offer him the throne. Bismarck, always the opportunist, now saw an opening in which to manipulate the crisis to further his own aims. He wrote to Leopold and his father, urging them to accept the offer. By June 1870, Leopold's candidacy was formalized. Predictably, the French were outraged by the news that a Hohenzollern was poised to take the Spanish throne.<sup>50</sup> The public backlash was precisely what Bismarck had hoped for. The nationalist outrage gripping the French press and public would be the tool with which he would provoke the war he needed to consolidate Prussian hegemony in central Europe. With events in motion, however, it was now imperative that Bismarck maneuver carefully—for France was not the only European power to grow wary

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-3.

<sup>50</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 548.

of Prussian expansion in the 1860s. Bismarck thus concluded that a war with France must be initiated under certain conditions. First, France must declare war on Prussia so the latter would not be viewed as the aggressor and so its military alliances with the south German states would be activated. Second, as with the war with Austria four years' prior, the war must be won quickly in order to prevent intervention by outside powers like Britain or Russia. For the second factor, Bismarck would again depend on Moltke who, immediately after Königgrätz, had begun planning for war against France.

The first factor would be far more difficult to secure. For obvious reasons, provoking France to declare war while making Prussia appear to be the victim was problematic. It seemed entirely out of the question when, on 2 July, Leopold withdrew his acceptance of the Spanish throne. Two weeks later, French ambassador Count Vincent Benedetti met with King William to request the king's assurance that another Hohenzollern would not seek the Spanish throne. William politely rejected Benedetti's request and then sent a telegram reporting the conversation to Bismarck in Berlin. After reading the king's report, Bismarck, sensing an opportunity, made the greatest gamble of his diplomatic career. He edited out certain portions of the king's report to make his response to Benedetti sound more harsh and provocative than it was, and then released the edited transcript to the Berlin newspapers.<sup>51</sup> It was a devious act, but it was successful. Another intense wave of outrage gripped the French public. Prominent newspapers and many of Napoleon's advisers demanded war. Despite considerable resistance in the national assembly, the body voted for war credits on 15 July. Four days later, France declared war on Prussia.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Otto von Bismarck. "Bismarck Remembers the Evening the Ems Dispatch was Edited (July 13, 1870)." *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed February 5, 2019. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1818](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1818)

<sup>52</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 38-40, 65.

The war was a disaster for France. After an initial advance into German territory—a venture that was as feckless as it was inconsequential—French forces fell back to positions along its border at the first sighting of the advancing Prussian and German troops. Despite meeting stiff resistance in border encounters at Wissembourg and Spicheren, Moltke’s forces smashed through the French lines and marched into France.<sup>53</sup> Napoleon III made his way to the front in an attempt to salvage the situation, but the German onslaught—made significantly more lethal by numerical superiority, as well as Prussia’s superior artillery and infantry tactics—was too much for France’s decaying military to withstand.<sup>54</sup> Throughout late July and August 1870, the French army suffered one defeat after another. By late August, Napoleon’s forces were split in two—one army was trapped in the fortress city of Metz while the other, of which Napoleon was a part, was encircled at Sedan, near the Belgian Border. On 1 September, Moltke attacked the French at Sedan. Slaughter ensued. By day’s end, there were over 3,000 French dead, 14,000 wounded, and 21,000 prisoners against 9,000 German dead, wounded, and missing.<sup>55</sup> The following day, Louis Napoleon rode to the Prussian headquarters at Donchéry to meet personally with King William and to request leniency. Instead, he was intercepted by Bismarck, who proceeded to sit the French emperor on a courtyard bench and berate him for over an hour. Soon after it became clear Prussia would show no mercy; Moltke demanded unconditional surrender and pledged to resume hostilities if the French did not submit. Two hours later French General Wimpffen, acting commander of the forces trapped at Sedan, complied. Every one of his remaining soldiers, over 100,000 in all, laid down their arms and marched into captivity.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Geoffrey Wawro provides an excellent account of these encounters in *The Franco-Prussian War*, 85-120.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-9.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

For the second time in four years, the Prussian army had been ordered into battle and subsequently crushed a major European army in less than two months. However, the Franco-Prussian War did not end with the French army's destruction at Sedan as the war of 1866 had ended after the Austrian defeat at Königgrätz. Revolution erupted in Paris after Louis Napoleon's capture. The new government vowed to fight on, to which the German forces responded by marching on and then besieging the French capital. Throughout the autumn and early winter of 1870-1, Prussian and German forces maintained the cordon around Paris while confronting French partisans in the south. Meantime, Prussian forces seized Versailles, where King William was to reside until the end of the conflict. By January Paris was starving and the provisional government's attempts to raise new armies and wage a guerilla war against German supply lines had fallen flat. To add insult to injury, William was declared German Emperor (Kaiser) in Versailles's famed Hall of Mirrors on 18 January.<sup>57</sup> News of the coronation was met with disgust in Paris, but by then it was evident the French people had lost the ability to fight on. Broken, humiliated, and out of options, the French agreed to an armistice on 26 January 1871.<sup>58</sup>

The Franco-Prussian War, the last of the three Wars of German Unification, was over. France was humiliated, its army in tatters, and its government in turmoil. Prussia, on the other hand, had reached its apex. Under Bismarck's leadership, Prussia united the German people under a single flag. While Bismarck had used his talents in the realms of politics and diplomacy to engineer the war-generating crises between 1864 and 1870, it was the Prussian army that had secured victory in the ensuing conflicts. Moreover, it was not the fact that Prussia won each of the wars of unification that made them significant—it was the manner in which Moltke and his armies had won them. None of the three wars were long, protracted conflicts. Each was a

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<sup>57</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 552.

<sup>58</sup> Wawro, *Franco-Prussian War*, 298.

relatively brief confrontation that, in the cases of 1866 and 1870-1, saw the armies of a major European power suffer a decisive defeat in less than two months. With the emergence of a unified German empire, the old world order vanished in an instant. Such a radical transformation, especially one brought on by war, was sure to leave deep scars in Europe's social and political landscapes.

### **Encirclement: The World Bismarck Made**

For France, those scars were immediately visible. The treaty imposed on her in 1871 was punitive in nature. The provinces of Alsace and Lorraine—not traditional German lands—were ceded to Germany. Moreover, significant financial reparations were imposed upon France. These impositions were clearly intended to keep France down, so to speak, yet the opposite happened. The French government and people pulled themselves together and managed to defy even the most positive of predictions and pay off the indemnity owed to Germany by late summer 1873—a full eighteen months ahead of schedule.<sup>59</sup> The French economy, moreover, began to flourish soon after its war debts were settled. By 1878, it had regained its place as one of the most lucrative economies in the world.<sup>60</sup> Defeat in Europe also forced the French to look outward. As they had done in their acquisition of Algeria following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, France expanded its empire into Morocco, Tunisia, West Africa, Madagascar, and Indo-China. By 1914 she possessed a colonial empire second only to Britain; abroad, nearly four million square miles and fifty million people fell under the French flag.<sup>61</sup>

Despite outward appearances, however, the French army and populace still seethed over the humiliation it suffered in 1870-1. "The war of 1870 placed the relationship between Germany

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<sup>59</sup> Showalter, *Wars of German Unification*, 342.

<sup>60</sup> Alistair Horne. *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

and France on a permanently difficult footing,” writes Christopher Clark, “The sheer scale of the German victory over France—a victory most contemporaries had not predicted—traumatized the French elites, triggering a crisis that reached deep into French culture, while the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine...imposed a lasting burden on Franco-German relations.”<sup>62</sup> France’s social crises and corresponding demands to avenge the humiliation of 1870-1, known as *revanche*, gripped French society and became the most potent force in France’s political and social circles. Consequently, the nation’s top diplomatic objective became that of containing Germany by forming an anti-German alliance.

Bismarck was well aware of the lasting damage the war would have on Franco-German relations. He also knew the French would attempt to counter German strength by building a great-power coalition against her, as Maria-Theresa of Austria had done the previous century against Prussia. He wrote in his memoirs that, “An anti-Prussian coalition like that of the Seven Years’ war between Russia, Austria and France, in union perhaps with other discontented dynasties, would to-day[sic] expose our existence to just as grave a peril, and if victorious would be far more disastrous.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, after 1871, he adopted a more peaceable approach to foreign relations. The chancellor sought to improve Germany’s international image by sheathing its sword and building transnational relations through diplomacy. To that end he was largely successful, striking a diplomatic deal of one sort or another with every Western power—except France—over the next two decades. By the late 1880s, Bismarck had constructed an intricate diplomatic web—most notably by orchestrating the Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy in 1882 and then the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia in 1887. The first was a

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<sup>62</sup> Christopher Clark. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 124.

<sup>63</sup> Bismarck, *The memoirs*, Vol II, 282.

defensive alliance in which, should one of the signatories be attacked by a hostile power, like France, the other two would come to its aid.<sup>64</sup> The Reinsurance Treaty was more of a neutrality pledge than an alliance; the treaty stated both powers would remain neutral should either enter a war with a third country, however it also stated that neutrality would not apply should Germany attack France or Russia attack Austria-Hungary.<sup>65</sup> Through these agreements, Bismarck succeeded in all but ensuring that another European war would not transpire in the immediate future. “Soft power” became the order of the day, and for the first time in two centuries the army was relegated to that of a secondary player in Prussian—now German—foreign policy.

That did not mean the army lost its importance in German affairs. Although it would not fight another European opponent until 1914, the army remained the most prominent institution in Germany. Its leading role in unifying the German peoples had not gone unnoticed. Indeed, its performance in the Wars of Unification greatly enhanced the army’s prestige. After 1871, veterans’ clubs sprang up throughout Germany. For a new nation that, despite its leaders’ best efforts to argue the contrary, had little in common outside of a shared language, military service became a unifying mechanism within the new empire.<sup>66</sup> Military service’s unifying aura would eventually cause friction as the Wars of Unification slipped further into the past and, as is so common in national memory, truth began to give way to nostalgia which in turn clashed with reality. Further complicating matters was Germany’s constitution—an issue which the next chapter will discuss in further detail—which, according to Clark, remained “frozen in time” due to the vague and contradictory ways in which the document dealt with the subjects of controlling and funding the military.<sup>67</sup> Maintaining stability in such a precarious system of governance, and

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<sup>64</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 125-7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>66</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 600-2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 562.

the delicate manner in which Bismarck constructed German foreign relations in the 1880s, thus depended on dynamic personalities and strong leadership in order to keep the system running. The scheme worked reasonably well as long as Bismarck occupied the chancellorship, but its weaknesses became painfully clear as soon as its leadership changed hands.

Fissures in the Bismarckian system emerged as soon as Kaiser William II took the throne in 1888. There can be no question of the young monarch's passion for Germany, its army, and the Hohenzollern monarchy, yet the young emperor was also arrogant and wildly erratic. Eager to escape the shadow of his grandfather William I—no small task, considering it was he who oversaw Germany's unification—William II sought to impose his own mark on Germany and its foreign policy. This led to immediate confrontations with Bismarck, whom William II dismissed in March 1890. Bismarck's successor, Leo von Caprivi, then allowed the Reinsurance Treaty to expire later that spring.<sup>68</sup> It was an inexcusable gaffe, one which France pounced upon almost immediately. In 1892, she negotiated a military alliance with Russia.<sup>69</sup> This Franco-Russian Alliance, formally signed in 1894, was a crucial turning point in European affairs. First, the alliance formed a formidable counterweight to the Triple Alliance headed by Germany. Over the next two decades, the two alliance blocks would vie for supremacy as each tried to lure the other European states into its respective center of gravity. More importantly, the Franco-Russian Alliance also meant that Germany had powerful adversaries along her eastern and western borders with which to contend. This grim reality, along with the *revanche* movement in France and increasingly souring relations with Russia, would terrorize German leadership and dictate their actions in the decades leading up the First World War.

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<sup>68</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 127-9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

## CHAPTER 3

### IN A WORLD OF ENEMIES: ARMAMENTS AND DETERRENCE

After defeating the French in 1871, the German Empire cemented its place among Europe's great powers. Early on, it was obvious that Germany's emergence placed Europe's geopolitical landscape on an unstable footing. France would not soon forget the humiliation imposed on her by the Franco-Prussian War, and it was only a matter of time before she made headway in building a coalition against her German rival. That reality was all too clear to the Reich's military leadership. Thus, Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke entered the Reichstag on 16 February 1874 to lobby for expanded support—notably increases in funding and manpower—for the Imperial Army. He first made clear the fact that France was undertaking a complete revamp of its armed forces based on the model Prussia used to crush Austria and France in the previous decade. Denmark and tiny Holland, too, were in the process of fortifying their borders with Germany. To the east, the Russian colossus looked on with deep-seated suspicion.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Reich's emergence in the center of Europe had upset the traditional equilibrium on the continent. No matter what direction German leadership looked, it was obvious that the superb performances by its military and diplomatic corps during the Wars of Unification had caused the rest of the continent look toward the new empire with apprehension.

In such a precarious climate, interstate tension was inevitable. It was also clear that France would seek to fan those flames to its advantage—and to Germany's detriment. “Well, Gentlemen, we have all witnessed how French factions, whose field of action lies in Paris, can hurry the Government and the people on to the most extraordinary decisions,” Moltke lamented

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<sup>1</sup> Helmuth von Moltke. *Essays, Speeches, and Memoirs of Field-Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke*. Translated by Charles Flint McClumpha (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893). Two vols., vol. II, 108-9.

to the Reichstag, “What is borne to us from across the Vosges is a rabid cry for revenge for the reverses which France herself had courted.”<sup>2</sup> To Moltke, the best way to mitigate the inevitable confrontations that tension would bring was to maintain a strong military. However, in the two years following Germany’s victory over France, Moltke contended, the Reich had become complacent. “Well, Gentlemen, we have not followed our neighbour’s lead in increasing the army...we must not allow the intrinsic value of our army to be lessened, either by shortening the term of service, or by a reduction of the peace establishment.”<sup>3</sup> Moltke then outlined the army’s new purpose. Prussian and German soldiers had performed brilliantly in the Wars of Unification, but the time for aggressive action was past. The army’s new purpose, Moltke argued, should be to maintain the peace of ’71. “I hope that we not only shall enjoy peace for a period of years, but that we shall also be in a position to impose peace,” he concluded, “then perhaps the world at large will become convinced that a powerful Germany in the centre of the Continent constitutes the best guarantee for the peace of Europe. But, Gentlemen, in order to be in a position to impose peace we must be armed for war, and I am of opinion that we stand face to face with the alternative—either to assume that the political aspect of Europe does not make a strong and efficient German army indispensable, or else to grant the means for the maintenance of such an army.”<sup>4</sup>

Within these words, we see a portent of what was to consume Moltke’s professional attention for the remainder of his career. Over the next fourteen years, he would undergo an arduous process of trying to think through, in terms of strategy, how best to protect Germany in the future. He first considered various types of preventive war, however the rise of massive

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

conscript armies and the increased killing efficiency of modern weaponry convinced him that, in a future conflict, the Clausewitzian adage that the defense is the superior form of combat would carry the day.<sup>5</sup> Moltke thus settled on a policy based upon deterrence through military strength. The basic idea was to create and then maintain an army that was so large and lethal that its very existence would deter an enemy state from commencing hostilities. Dennis Showalter likens the policy to that exercised during the Cold War, stating “it depended less on threat, punishment, and denial than on persuasion: convincing other states that sustaining the existing European order was both desirable and prudent, in the context of the alternative.”<sup>6</sup>

By the time Moltke retired in 1888, his position was clear: only by maintaining a strong military presence in Central Europe could peace be preserved. This sentiment was to be a recurring theme in German military policy over the following decades. Bismarck, too, championed the idea, as seen in his dynamic speech on 6 February 1888. However, Germany’s armaments expansion program met limited, often mixed results. This chapter shall contend that, although the German military steadily expanded in the decades preceding the First World War, the policy of deterrence failed because Germany could not keep pace with its rivals due to lofty, often contradictory objectives and internal resistance. To begin with, German military leadership set out to match the armaments programs of both France *and* Russia. The former possessed a robust economy and a populace seething with resentment and yearning for revenge. The latter, although not yet an economic juggernaut, possessed immense reserves of manpower and was headed by a true autocrat, meaning its government generally did not have to contend with political infighting in order to push military expansion. Germany, on the other hand, was

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<sup>5</sup> Dennis Showalter. “German Grand Strategy: A Contradiction in Terms?” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, No. 2 (1990), 73-6.

<sup>6</sup> Dennis Showalter. “From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine: The German Way of War, 1890-1914.” *The Journal of Military History* 64, No. 3 (Jul., 2000), 683.

hindered, among a plethora of other factors, by a dysfunctional constitutional system and an oft-divided legislature. These issues would become more apparent, and make Germany's situation more precarious, as time marched closer to August 1914.

### **Between French *Revanche* and the Russian Colossus**

Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke spent his final seventeen years as Chief of the General Staff searching for a feasible strategy by which Germany could fight a war against its greatest rivals: France and Russia. For years, he developed and experimented with one idea after another, yet a feasible strategy eluded the great field marshal. A recurring issue was that he simply did not have enough men to mount effective operations on both his eastern and western frontiers.<sup>7</sup> The initial realization of this ominous fact was Moltke's chief reason for appearing before the Reichstag in February 1874, and he would continue to lobby for army expansion until his death in 1891. While it was essential to describe Germany's precarious strategic situation to the legislature, it was even more important to secure additional funding to enlarge his forces—for Germany was not alone in pursuing military expansion. After 1871, France and Russia both embarked upon remarkable campaigns of reconstruction and reform based on intensive military study and legislation.

Institutionally, defeat forced the French army to take a long look inward and to assess what had caused things to go so wrong in 1870. The army responded with sweeping reforms aimed to eliminate the deficiencies that so paralyzed it during the war with Prussia. "A new spirit ran through the whole army, determined to expunge recent blots on its reputation," writes Alistair Horne, "With it went a passion for study...Penetrating studies were made of the 1870 campaign, and in their sweeping reorganization, the army leaders made no bones about imitating

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<sup>7</sup> Terrance Zuber. *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 58-60, 70.

the conqueror.”<sup>8</sup> They established a general staff, modeled after Moltke’s, to study military science and prepare for future conflicts—chiefly with the German Empire—while the Quai d’Orsay secured the passage of legislation to increase conscription. In a series of three successive laws, France established universal military service for the first time in its history. More striking, active service was initially set at five years—the longest in Europe. Its flourishing economy allowed the country to invest vast quantities of money in improving the French railway network—one of her chief disadvantages in 1870—and to modernize and improve fortifications in places like Metz and Verdun. Fifteen years after its defeat, Horne argues, France had regained its place as one of the world’s premier military powers. In terms of manpower, the French were also quickly outpacing Germany. Although the German population was significantly higher than the French, the latter’s conscription laws ensured that more French than Germans were drafted into its army. Moreover, France’s extensive colonial expansion in the late nineteenth century gave it additional reserves of men and materials from which France could draw in the event of war.<sup>9</sup>

In the east, Russia loomed as an ever-present threat. In the previous decade the Czar doubled his number of infantry divisions and, in December 1870, his war minister claimed to possess a massive land army of 1.2 million men.<sup>10</sup> The Russian state, moreover, possessed an immense male population of 24 million military-aged souls from which it could draw recruits. Its “Charter of Military Service,” issued 1 January 1874, sought to fully unlock this potential. It opened by stating “Protection of the throne and the fatherland is the sacred duty of every Russian subject. The male population, without distinction of states, is subject to military service” and

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<sup>8</sup> Alistair Horne. *The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-7.

<sup>10</sup> D. A. Milyutin. “On the Development of our Armed Forces (10 December 1870).” *EuroDocs*. Accessed February 6, 2019. <http://www.hrono.ru/dokum/18701210.html>

then subjected every able-bodied male to conscription.<sup>11</sup> Over the next six years, the army expanded considerably: 150,000 recruits were taken into service in 1874, and 235,000 were added in 1880.<sup>12</sup> Although Russia was not directly antagonistic to a unified Germany, relations between the two empires began to sour when Bismarck finalized an alliance with Austria-Hungary, Russia's chief rival in the Balkans, in 1882.<sup>13</sup> Bismarck attempted to assuage Russia's displeasure with the Austrian alliance by negotiating the Reinsurance Treaty in 1887. That treaty secured Germany's eastern border and effectively guaranteed it against French aggression in the west—but the strategic relief would only be temporary.

Germany's strategic situation grew exponentially more complicated when William II allowed the Reinsurance Treaty to lapse, thus allowing Russia to drift into an alliance with France. The signing of the Franco-Russian alliance in 1894 marked Bismarck's and Moltke's worst fear coming to fruition: Germany had strong, potentially hostile powers along her eastern and western borders. The Triple Alliance did provide Germany with two allies to its south, Austria-Hungary and Italy, but that did not constitute a formidable coalition. The Austro-Hungarian government was paralyzed by political infighting that had a corrosive effect on its armed forces.<sup>14</sup> Italy, moreover, was anything but a staunch ally—especially since its major territorial goals in Europe could be realized only at Austrian expense. By 1902, a full twelve years before it formally abandoned the Triple Alliance, Italy reached an agreement with France that there were almost no conceivable circumstances that could cause the two to go to war.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "Charter of Military Service (1 January 1874)." *EuroDocs*. Accessed February 6, 2019. <http://www.hrono.ru/dokum/1800dok/18740101.php>

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

<sup>13</sup> David Stevenson. *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-7.

Predictably, Italy did not take up arms with its German and Austro-Hungarian allies in 1914, instead choosing to remain neutral until entering the war against them the following year.

France and Russia, in contrast, were a daunting pair. Before and after signing their alliance, the two empires underwent great programs aimed at increasing their military power. In addition to their implementation of universal conscription, France and Russia began extensive railway expansion programs. Drawing from the lessons of 1870-1, when Prussia's superior rail system allowed it to shuttle German forces to the front before France could mass its armies there, the two nations began allocating resources with which to expand and improve their respective railway networks. France completed its project by 1884, thereby increasing the speed and efficiency with which she could mobilize and deploy her forces should another war break out.<sup>16</sup> Thus, by the nineteenth century's end Germany had at least partially lost two of its three chief advantages during the Wars of Unification: railway efficiency and its large reserves of trained soldiers. Drastic countermeasures would be needed to prevent the Reich from being dwarfed by its neighbors. But, as we shall see, the relationship between the Kaiser, the Reichstag, and the military was a complicated system that was in many ways constructed against itself. These institutional obstacles would greatly hinder the empire's ability to keep pace with its rivals.

### **Internal Resistance**

For Germany, a proportional response to the Franco-Russian armaments programs was no easy task. Several factors inhibited army expansion. The first was the German Constitution. Managing the Imperial Army under the constitution was difficult largely because it was a vague, sometimes contradictory document. Bismarck, the system's leading architect, ensured it was constructed this way in order to keep as much power as possible in the Kaiser's hands. It is clear

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18-9.

the constitution aimed to keep army control firmly in the emperor's grasp—after all, armies were the traditional tools with which monarchs had maintained their grips on power. Bismarck intended Germany's army to be no different. The Kaiser's power over the army is stipulated in Article 63, which states “The entire land force of the Reich will form a single army which in war and peace is under the command of the Emperor,” and in Article 64: “All German troops are bound to obey the commands of the Emperor unconditionally.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, German officers and soldiers swore allegiance to the emperor, not the constitution.<sup>18</sup> These stipulations make it abundantly clear that control over Germany's armed forces was intentionally, and firmly, placed in the Kaiser's hands. The army was a personal instrument belonging to the emperor; one that, theoretically, could be used only at his discretion.

Funding the army and determining its strength levels was a different and far more complicated matter. Article 60, for example, states that “The effective strength of the German army in peace is fixed until 31 December 1871 at 1 per cent of the population of the year 1867, and the separate States of the Federation supply it pro rata thereof. Subsequently the effective strength of the army in peace will be determined by legislation of the Reichstag.”<sup>19</sup> Article 63, however, seems to contradict this statement, claiming that “The Emperor determines the effective strength, the division and arrangement of the contingents of the Reich army,” while also granting the Kaiser power to “take care that all the divisions of troops within the German army are numerically complete and utilisable for war, and that unity in the organisation and formation, in the armament and command, in the training of the men, as well as in the qualifications of the

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<sup>17</sup> “Constitution of the German Empire (April 16, 1871).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed December 4, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=2788](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=2788)

<sup>18</sup> Daniel J. Hughes and Richard L. DiNardo. *Imperial Germany and War, 1871-1918* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

officers, be established and maintained.” For that purpose, the document maintains, the Kaiser “has the right to convince himself of the condition of the separate contingents at all times by inspection, and to order the reformation of any defects thereby discovered.”<sup>20</sup> According to the language in these articles, determining adequate force levels for the army was the responsibility of *both* the Kaiser and Reichstag, yet the final decision on funding was ultimately left up to the legislature. The arrangement was sure to create friction when budgetary matters were due for a vote, for an army’s funding normally corresponds with its prescribed size. Given the fact that Kaiser and legislature rarely saw eye to eye on military matters, this contradictory distribution of power left the door open for constitutional crises surrounding who, exactly, had the final say on determining the army’s size.

Like German diplomacy under Bismarck, managing the army within the constitutional system was an arrangement built upon personalities. What Bismarck had not anticipated was the issues that would emerge when Germany found itself under less capable leadership. These problems quickly began to surface after William II, who was less resolute and far more erratic than his grandfather, assumed the throne and when Leo von Caprivi, who was certainly no Bismarck, became Chancellor. Moreover, conservatives—the greatest supporters of military expansion—never controlled a majority in the Reichstag after Bismarck’s departure from office (in fact, they had by that time struggled to maintain a significant presence for two decades). Between 1890 and 1912, for instance, conservative legislators filled more than 15% of Reichstag seats on only three occasions. In each of those elections, they never won more than 19% of seats. During that same span the Social Democrats, the chief opponents to armaments expansion, were consistently one of the largest, if not the largest, parties in the legislature—a feat the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

conservatives never managed to accomplish.<sup>21</sup> The German legislature, moreover, was a peculiar institution whose power was loosely defined by creators (like Bismarck) who were skeptical of representative democracy. The result was a fragmented political system that was neither wholly autocratic nor fully democratized.<sup>22</sup> The constitution's ambiguous language regarding control of the army—that final decisions regarding it were left up to the Kaiser while decisions concerning force numbers and funding were left to the Reichstag—made legislative friction and deadlock an inevitability. Predictably, fierce debates concerning opposition to increases in military expenditure—and to the increased taxes necessary to fund such expansions—plagued all military-related legislation during the Wilhelmine Era. While the Imperial Army and German defense spending did grow steadily between 1890 and 1914, parliamentary infighting ensured Germany would find immense difficulty in keeping pace with its rivals.

Another internal obstacle to military expansion came from the most unlikely of places: Germany's traditional military elite. Since the days of the Great Elector, members of the land-owning nobility, the Junkers, had dominated Prussia's officer corps.<sup>23</sup> In 1808, the Junker monopoly over the Prussian officer corps was broken when a new law opened the ranks to all classes. However, after Napoleon's final defeat in 1815, they still constituted an overwhelming majority of Prussia's officer corps.<sup>24</sup> That dominance continued until shortly after the Wars of Unification. Much to their chagrin, unification ushered in a new era in which the Junkers' grasp began to weaken. As stated in the previous chapter, the wars of 1866-71 significantly enhanced

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<sup>21</sup> "Elections to the Reichstag (1890-1912)." *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed February 10, 2019. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=1332](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1332)

<sup>22</sup> For an extensive analysis of the Reichstag and German Parliamentarization, see Marcus Kreuzer, "Parliamentarization and the Question of German Exceptionalism: 1867-1918." *Central European History* 36, No. 3 (2003), 327-57.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 167-9.

<sup>24</sup> Robert M. Citino. *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2005), 129.

the army's social standing in Germany; the Junker class enjoyed a corresponding elevation of their place in society. However, substantial army expansion as advocated by Moltke and Bismarck, and the increased technical proficiency that was required to command large bodies of troops armed with modern weaponry, would require significant expansion of the officer corps. Since there were a finite number of military-aged male Junker, a drastic increase in the number of officers would require a corresponding increase in commissions granted to soldiers of middle-class and other non-Junker origins. Seeing this possibility as a threat to their social and military hegemony, many Junkers vehemently opposed expanding the officer corps.<sup>25</sup>

Not all German military leaders shared these sentiments. Moltke, himself a descendant of Junker lineage, would have none of it. Speaking to the Reichstag on 9 December 1883, Moltke made his beliefs on the matter clear: "An argument has...been advanced on a point of principle to the effect that the introduction of these innovations would tend to keep officers aloof from other classes of society, and that their spirit of caste would thereby be fostered. True, Gentlemen, but then for caste-spirit we soldiers have another name; we call it *comradeship*." He then reminded the legislature of comradeship's integral role on the battlefield, stating "It was *comradeship* which, in our last campaign, moved other troops to hasten up from all sides to render assistance and support to small detachments which were hard pressed; and it was to this spirit that the successes achieved were really due."<sup>26</sup> Then, Moltke's words became more pointed: "In listening to the debate in the House one might be led to believe that a distinction existed in the army between officers of noble birth, and those drawn from the middle classes. Gentlemen, such is not the case; when an aspirant-officer has been approved of by his brother-

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<sup>25</sup> David Stevenson, "Was a Peaceful Outcome Thinkable? The European Land Armaments Race before 1914," in *An Improbable War? : The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914*, ed. Holger Afflerbach (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 133.

<sup>26</sup> Moltke, *Essays and Speeches*, II, 80.

officers, and has joined their ranks, the spirit of comradeship admits of no further distinctions being drawn. No one could succeed in introducing such a rift into the army; such an attempt would be like a useless waste of powder...Gentlemen, there is a great difference between the order given generally to a body of men with whom the officer is not familiar and the order which makes a soldier say to himself, 'This order concerns *me*. My commanding officer knows *me* individually.'"<sup>27</sup> There can be no question of the field marshal's stance on the matter. On the battlefield, an officer's competence and the ability to gain his soldiers' trust were far more important qualities than those inherited from one's lineage. While many German military leaders did not share Moltke's opinion—and continued to resist efforts to expand the officer corps well into the twentieth century—his view ultimately prevailed. Between 1865 and 1914, the percentage of officer commissions held by the nobility dropped from 65% to 30%.<sup>28</sup>

### **The European Land Armaments Race**

To fully see the effects of Germany's internal resistance on its military standing, it would be a useful exercise to examine the land armaments race that swept over Europe in the ten years preceding the First World War. Historian David Stevenson argues the race can be broken down into three distinct phases: 1904-8, 1908-12, and 1912-14. The levels of defense spending—not just in Germany, but amongst Europe's largest powers: Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Italy—increased by 6.4% between 1903 and 1908 and by 39.4% between 1908 and 1913. The disparity is striking, so much so that Stevenson argues "The suddenness, accelerating pace, and simultaneity that characterized the growth of the Continental armies strongly suggest a competitive process."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Stevenson's thesis that the sudden spike in

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-1.

<sup>28</sup> Stevenson, *Cataclysm*, 39.

<sup>29</sup> Stevenson, "Peaceful Outcome," 132-3.

defense expenditure possessed a competitive nature is supported by the fact that each transition from one phase to the next coincided with one international crisis or another. Each of these crises drew more European powers towards one diplomatic center of gravity or another—the Franco-Russian Alliance or the Austro-German Alliance—and each crisis was instrumental in deepening the polarization of Europe that would eventually lead to war in 1914.

After steady increases in military spending throughout the 1890s, the early twentieth century saw a period of relative equilibrium. Two peripheral events, one in the Far East and another in the Balkans, would upset and then upend this balance. First, Japan humiliated Russia in the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War, in which Russia lost two of its three fleets and much of its Far-East army.<sup>30</sup> Russia's defeat, despite happening on the other side of the globe, greatly increased the likelihood of a European confrontation. Since Russian expansion and influence were effectively checked in the East, the Czar's foreign policy shifted its gaze to the Balkans, where the crumbling Ottoman Empire had steadily lost control over the previous two decades. Tensions in that region first arose in 1908 when Austria-Hungary ignited an international crisis by annexing the former Ottoman provinces Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>31</sup> Russia and neighboring Serbia were outraged but, due to the fledgling nature of the Serbian military and the fact that Russia was still recovering from its defeat in the war with Japan, neither was in any position to intervene.

Although the Bosnian Annexation Crisis did not lead to war, it did shatter Europe's military equilibrium. It was in the four-year period following the Bosnian crisis that European

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<sup>30</sup> For an excellent account of the Russo-Japanese War, see Alistair Horne, *Hubris: The Tragedy of Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 23-110.

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Clark. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 33-4.

military expenditures rose by an alarming 39.4 percent.<sup>32</sup> The most noticeable increase was in the Russian military; its army added over 200,000 men to its ranks from 1908-9 alone.<sup>33</sup> The French, meanwhile, began arming Serbia.<sup>34</sup> This was an ominous development for Austria-Hungary. Having a hostile Serbia severely undermined security along the dual empire's southern border, all but ensuring it would face enemies on multiple fronts—Serbia to the south, Russia to the east—in a future conflict. France, meanwhile, witnessed a modest, almost insignificant decrease in defense expenditure and manpower in its standing army. However, it is worth noting that during that same time its naval expenditure increased from £13.2 million in 1908 to £20.7 million in 1911, before dropping to £17.1 million in 1912.<sup>35</sup>

Initially, Germany could not produce a proportional response. While her military expenditure did see a modest increase of £2 million from 1908-9, the army saw a minor decrease of 9,000 active soldiers. This reduction in troop strength was largely due to Germany's futile attempt to challenge British naval hegemony. This shift in focus from land forces to naval began at the erratic William's behest just before the turn of the century. Not only was it a race that Germany could never win, it also meant Germany's military aims were doubled while its financial resources remained stagnant. The decision to expand the navy sparked intense debates within German leadership. Eventually, the navalists prevailed and in 1898 the Reichstag passed a navy bill which initiated a massive naval construction program that would dominate Germany's defense budget until the Reich conceded defeat in the naval race in 1912.<sup>36</sup> Although the effects of William's fruitless maritime pursuits were not significantly felt during the initial period of

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<sup>32</sup> Stevenson, "Peaceful Outcome," 132.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 131-2.

<sup>36</sup> Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 147-8.

equilibrium (1904-8), they all but ensured that German army expansion would be unable to muster a proportional response when that equilibrium was upset between 1909 and 1911.

The European arms race escalated again in 1912, again due to a pair of peripheral events. The first was the Agadir Crisis in Morocco. The dispute began in April 1911, when the Quai d'Orsay renounced a 1909 agreement concerning Franco-German business interests in the North African sultanate and subsequently deployed a large French force to its shores.<sup>37</sup> Germany interpreted the deployment as a French seizure of power—a rational supposition, given France's aggressive colonial expansion in recent decades. The Reich protested vehemently on the diplomatic stage and dispatched the antiquated gunboat *Panther* to the Moroccan coast as a token show of force.<sup>38</sup> The crisis continued to escalate until British Prime Minister David Lloyd George intervened and threatened war against Germany. The Reich backed down, and in November 1911 France and Germany signed a treaty that made Morocco a French protectorate, ensured “respectful treatment” of German trade rights in the region, and ceded minor parts of the French Congo to German Cameroon. The treaty greatly favored France and was met with outrage in Germany.<sup>39</sup>

The second event again occurred in the Balkans. On 8 October 1912 the armies of Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro launched a joint offensive to dislodge the Ottoman Empire from the last of its Balkan possessions. The Ottomans, engaged at that time with concluding a costly war with Italy over control of Libya, were powerless to stop the onslaught. When an armistice was signed on 3 December, the Balkan coalition had overrun over half the Ottomans' remaining European possessions. Things grew exponentially more complicated in the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 204-5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 208-9.

following year, when the Second Balkan War erupted as the first war's victors turned on each other and fought over its spoils.<sup>40</sup> The two Balkan Wars, although occurring on the European periphery and not directly involving any of its major powers, nevertheless further polarized the continent as members of each alliance bloc—particularly Austria-Hungary and Russia—took sides.<sup>41</sup> The ensuing Balkan tensions would reach their apex with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, on 28 June 1914.

The Balkan Wars' influence on the European arms race cannot be understated. Defense expenditure rose significantly in all six prominent European powers. In Russia and Austria-Hungary, whose foreign interests were most closely tied to Balkan affairs, total defense expenditure increased by 12.1% and 39.3%, respectively—although Russian expenditures still more than doubled those in Austria-Hungary. In Germany, total defense expenditure doubled from 1912 to 1913, with the lion's share going to the army. As a result, the standing army added 33,000 active soldiers in 1912 and an impressive 138,000 in 1913.<sup>42</sup> The following year, the army added another 18,600 soldiers to its ranks, bringing the peacetime Imperial Army to a total of 800,646 officers and men.<sup>43</sup> This swell in active soldiers, in conjunction with Germany's ever-growing pool of trained reservists, meant that, when the next great European war came in August 1914, the Reich would have just over 3.5 million men to march against its enemies.<sup>44</sup>

However, German forces would still be dwarfed by their enemies. The Russian army alone outnumbered that of Germany, and France was sure to exponentially increase its army's

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 253-8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 293-300.

<sup>42</sup> All figures available in Stevenson, "Peaceful Outcome," 132.

<sup>43</sup> "Strength of the German Army (1890-1914)." *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed February 22, 2019. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=1394](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1394)

<sup>44</sup> Alexander Watson. *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I, The People's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 73.

size with its immense pool of reservists—one of the many lessons the French took from 1870. Moreover, Austria-Hungary’s standing army numbered far less than its French and German counterparts<sup>45</sup> and, like Germany, would have to divide those forces between two fronts. Should war erupt between the two alliance blocs, Germany would be in a perilous position. It would be wedged between two enemy armies, the first of which nearly equaled German strength while the second greatly outnumbered it. Moreover, its only reliable ally would likewise have to divide its meagre forces between two fronts. The Imperial German Army, despite its reputation for excellence and aura of near-invincibility, would find itself at a severe disadvantage the moment a European war began.

## **Conclusions**

War did come in 1914, and Germany began it at a disadvantage. While the Imperial Army underwent a remarkable expansion between 1912 and 1914, it had been too little, too late. The writing had certainly been on the walls for decades—Moltke warned of this disposition as early as 1874 and Bismarck reiterated it in his definitive 1888 speech. However, despite decades of lobbying and pleading for increases in manpower and funding for the army, it still found itself at a severe disadvantage when the next great European war began. Was this disparity preventable? That question is difficult to answer, largely because the policy of deterrence outlined by Moltke and Bismarck would require titanic allocations of money and resources. While their arguments certainly had merit, it seems no one in German leadership paused to consider the herculean task that lay before it—trying to keep pace with the armament expansion programs of two great powers simultaneously. The German constitutional system certainly did not help matters, as its ambiguous language regarding military affairs all but ensured that

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<sup>45</sup> Stevenson, “Peaceful Outcome,” 132.

political infighting and legislative deadlock would plague any significant attempt at armaments expansion.

The army's stagnation between 1900 and 1912 highlights another chief issue within Wilhelmine Germany's armaments policy. Not only was it confronted with the enormous task of keeping pace with two major powers, which proved impossible, it was also headed by an erratic emperor whose ambitions were indecisive and unpredictable. This disadvantage was another result of Bismarck's constitutional system. Its ambiguous construction meant the arrangement depended on shrewd, competent leadership to maintain its effectiveness. When German leadership gave way to a new generation in 1890—one that could never hope to match the finesse of its predecessor—the system became excruciatingly difficult to operate at times and paralyzed at others. Untenable aspirations, erratic leadership, and dithering appropriations of funding all but guaranteed Germany's policy of deterrence would fail. Worse, those issues would plague the Reich's leadership until it collapsed in 1918.

## CHAPTER 4

### IN VIEW OF A GATHERING STORM: CULTURAL MOBILIZATION AND THE “PEOPLE’S WAR”

The twilight of Helmuth von Moltke’s career was a trying time. As the revered field marshal spent his final two decades in the army planning for potential conflicts with Germany’s rival nations, he became more and more dispirited by his country’s increasingly unfavorable position. Decades of research, field exercises, and war games led Moltke to the realization that a new breed of warfare loomed on the horizon. He began to recognize that Prussia’s, and later Germany’s, rapid victories in the limited wars with Denmark, Austria, and France between 1864 and 1871 were anomalies rather than portents for the manner in which future wars would unfold. The armies of Europe had learned from Moltke’s experience and, more importantly, the experiences of the nations whose armies were humiliated by the Prussian war machine. In the ensuing decades, European armies rapidly expanded their ranks and acquired modern weaponry while reforming their operational practices according to the Prussian model. It was clear that the next major conflict would dwarf anything the world had yet seen.

Moreover, it seems Moltke had become dismayed by the immense changes in Germany’s social and political fabric since the revolutions of 1848. He was old enough to remember a time when policies concerning foreign relations and military affairs were left entirely to a king whose power was absolute. Decades of reform had eroded the king’s power while that of the Reichstag had grown steadily—albeit slowly—since German Unification in 1871. Increased suffrage meant public opinion now played a significant role in national affairs, and Moltke was unsure whether this development would bear positive or negative consequences.

It was with these concerns in mind that Moltke entered the Reichstag on 14 May 1890 to deliver his final speech to the legislature. The Reichstag was once again locked in a contentious debate over a military spending bill. As had been the case before Bismarck's appearance two years' prior, negotiations regarding troop levels and financial support had reached a deadlock. Moltke entered the chamber not only to break the stalemate in favor of those who supported increased military spending, but also to issue a warning. Although approaching his ninetieth birthday, the old field marshal still possessed a commanding presence as he gingerly made his way to the podium. He was a towering figure, standing over six feet tall—although his posture now slumped a bit due to his old age. His face, marked by deep lines brought on by years of field work and three campaigns, looked across the chamber with a cold, solemn gaze.

Moltke wasted no time and minced no words. He first addressed what he viewed as the dangers of public opinion. "Gentlemen, it is not princes, and more especially Governments, who, in our days bring about war. The days of Cabinet wars are past—now we have only the People's war, and to conjure up such a war as this, with all its incalculable consequences, cannot be resolved upon by any prudent Government. No, Gentlemen, the elements which menace peace are to be found among the people...a Government which is not strong enough to oppose the passions of the People and Party machinations, constitutes a lasting danger to peace."<sup>1</sup> This declaration was exactly what conservative members of the legislature yearned to hear. Moltke, the victor of the Wars of Unification, was openly warning the empire about the dangers of pandering to public opinion. There were merits to his concerns. The late nineteenth century was, after all, a time in which the forces of nationalism often dominated public opinion, which had in

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<sup>1</sup> Moltke, Helmuth Graf von. *Essays, Speeches, and Memoirs of Field-Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke*. Translated by Charles Flint McClumpha (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893). Two vols., vol. II, 136.

itself become a formidable influence on Europe's geopolitical landscape. It was only a matter of time, Moltke reasoned, before pandering to such excitements led to catastrophe.

Next, Moltke turned his attention to the nature in which he believed future wars would be waged. "Gentlemen, if war, which has now for more than ten years been hanging like a sword of Damocles over our heads—if war breaks out, one cannot foresee how long it will last or how it will end. It is the Great Powers of Europe which, armed as they never were before, are now entering the arena against each other. There is not one of these that can be so completely overcome in one, or even in two campaigns...Gentlemen, it may be a Seven Years' War, it may be a Thirty Years' War; and woe be to him who sets Europe in flames, who first casts the match into the powder barrel."<sup>2</sup> Unlike Bismarck's dynamic speech in 1888, transcripts of Moltke's words in May 1890 contain no interjections of "Bravo!" or mentions of applause; one can deduce his speech was instead met with eerie silence. With conviction, the illustrious field marshal had made clear his growing apprehensions about the future and what the next European war would bring. It is clear he feared the growing power of public opinion and, while decisions of war and peace were still ultimately in the hands of the Kaiser, Moltke was apprehensive about the government's ability to act with reason while under assault by public opinion. More concerning, a lifetime of military experience and nearly two decades of studying Germany's prospects for victory in the next European conflagration led him to an ominous conclusion. The massive size of European armies and modern weaponry's increasing potential for destruction meant such a conflict would require the mobilization of not only armies of millions, but of entire populations. Germany, Moltke counselled, should prepare accordingly.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 137.

Moltke died less than a year later, but his warnings remained in the minds of Germany's military and political leadership. It is also clear, however, that Moltke's warning met mixed interpretations. As is so common in politics, they all agreed storm clouds were gathering on the horizon but could not come to an agreement on how best to approach the situation. To some, the solution lay in restoring universal conscription and the nationalization of industry and railroads to prepare adequate resources. Other interpretations were far more radical in cultural terms. Some leaders, for example, proposed sweeping reforms to Germany's education system, with the goal of militarizing the nation's youth to prepare them for the sacrifices and tribulations that a modern war would entail. In all these areas, numerous attempts were made to militarize German society. This process, which will henceforth be referred to as "cultural mobilization," aimed to reconstruct Germany's cultural fabric in order to turn the population into a bellicose society prepared to meet the challenges and tribulations that would accompany the looming inferno Moltke described in his last days.

While many within German leadership circles attempted to harness public passions through cultural mobilization, this chapter shall contend that, in most instances, the effort failed. This failure resulted not from lack of effort—indeed, the resulting social programs and reforms touched nearly every strata of German society—but because the movement's leaders lacked a clear understanding of what, precisely, their objectives were. The more radical leaders who advocated cultural mobilization failed to appreciate that cultural constructions are highly abstract, leading many of their contemporaries to ask what exactly was the "German" culture they sought to create. Examination of their writings, and works by other intellectual critics, shows that the radical leadership did not know themselves. For example, terms like "Prussian" and "German" were often used interchangeably when discussing cultural issues. Moreover,

advocates of cultural mobilization had to grapple with the fact that many Germans objected to identification with what they regarded as the mantle of Prussian militarism. For Bavarians, Saxons, Westphalians, Württembergers, and others, “German” culture possessed a quite different orientation; there’s was more open-minded and less overtly authoritarian, more literary than military, more social than national. Determining just how to bridge the gap between the two interpretations of “German” culture, or, as many advocates of cultural mobilization desired, to expunge one set of ideals in favor of the other, plagued the movement until the Reich collapsed in 1918.

### **Searching for a Place in the Sun**

How could cultural mobilization’s advocates go about creating their desired society? Military and political leaders of the time offered numerous theories and potential solutions, but few were as radical or as influential as those presented in the works of Prussian General and leading military writer Friedrich von Bernhardi. The son of prominent Prussian diplomat and historian Theodor von Bernhardi, Friedrich dedicated his life to the army, first seeing combat as a twenty-one-year-old lieutenant in the Prussian Army’s 14<sup>th</sup> Hussars during the Franco-Prussian War. The young Bernhardi distinguished himself during the conflict and eventually had the honor of being the first German soldier to ride through the Arc de Triomphe when Moltke’s army entered Paris in February 1871. Bernhardi spent nearly four decades in the army after the war, eventually serving on the General Staff and commanding the VII Army Corps before retiring in 1909.<sup>3</sup> In his retirement, Bernhardi turned to writing and political activism. He had grown horrified with German society, which he saw as entering a state of decay due to—in his view—its increasingly materialistic and passive nature. He claimed these desires for material

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<sup>3</sup> Markus Pöhlmann. “Bernhardi, Freidrich von.” *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Accessed January 18, 2019. [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/bernhardi\\_friedrich\\_von](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/bernhardi_friedrich_von)

gain at home and pacifism abroad had emasculated Germany and created rampant complacency. Bernhardi saw in war a chance for social regeneration, and for the German people to assert themselves as the dominant nation in Europe: “War is a biological necessity of the first importance, a regulative element in the life of mankind which cannot be dispensed with, since without it an unhealthy development will follow, which excludes every advancement of the race, and therefore all real civilization. ‘War is the father of all things.’ The sages of antiquity long before Darwin recognized this.”<sup>4</sup> For Bernhardi, cultural mobilization and war were not only essential to national security, but also to preserving the German way of life.

How could Germany accomplish this regeneration? Bernhardi attempted to provide solutions to this problem in his 1911 book *Germany and the Next War*, a feverish treatise about the supposed splendor and social benefits that, according to Bernhardi, accompany a nation’s involvement in armed conflict. The book is rife with frenetic diatribes about the moral necessity of war, Germany’s right and duty to make war, as well as a variety of skewed, factually incorrect discussions of German military history. In addition to its frantic tirades, Bernhardi’s book offers solutions to Germany’s military shortcomings that range from practical, but lofty, to downright absurd. Numerous calls for a return to comprehensive enforcement of universal military service, as Prussia had done during the Napoleonic Wars—this was, after all, the only way German army expansion could hope to keep pace with that of France and Russia—serves as an example of the former. On the other hand, Bernhardi also makes the recommendation that all young men be removed from the temptations and monotony of city life, stating, “Apart from many forms of employment in factories which are directly injurious to health, the factors which stunt physical development may be found in the housing conditions, in the pleasure-seeking town life, and in

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich von Bernhardi. *Germany and the Next War*. Translated by Allen H. Powles (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914), 18.

alcoholism.”<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the desire to remove a nation’s youth from the monotony and corruption associated with city life was an idea uniquely belonging neither to Bernhardi nor to Germany. German thinkers, like many of their contemporaries elsewhere, were aware of the enormous changes caused by, as well as challenges raised by, industrialization and modernization. However, Bernhardi and like-minded Germans were unique because they had difficulty conceptualizing anything other than a rather crude Social Darwinistic response to the problem.

Hysterics and illogical tirades aside, it is clear Bernhardi agreed with the most basic premise of Moltke’s final warning—a colossal struggle was approaching that would test the resolve of every German. “In a future European war ‘masses’ will be employed to an extent unprecedented in any previous one,” Bernhardi writes, “Weapons will be used whose deadliness will exceed all previous experience. More effective and varied means of communication will be available than were known in earlier wars. These three momentous factors will mark the war of the future.”<sup>6</sup> In order to confront these ominous challenges, Bernhardi declares that Germany “must preserve the stern, industrious, old-Prussian feeling...we must continuously steel our strength by great political and economic endeavours, and must not be content with what we have already attained, or abandon ourselves to the indolent pursuit of pleasure; those only [sic] we shall remain healthy in mind and body, and able to keep our place in the world.”<sup>7</sup> These statements are clear indicators that Bernhardi also agreed with Moltke’s assertion that military leaders must prepare themselves not just by expanding the ranks of the army and modernizing its weaponry, but also by psychologically preparing the entire nation for such a struggle.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

How, specifically, could the Reich accomplish this goal? A unified German nation was a recent creation, after all, thus there were no standardized parameters for what constituted “German” culture. The above writings illustrate this issue, as Bernhardt often labels characteristics and ideals as “Prussian” and “German” interchangeably. This was a counterproductive practice, as many Germans outside Prussia’s traditional boundaries looked upon Prussians and their militarist traditions with contempt.<sup>8</sup> Creating a common cultural identity that all Germans could share thus required a lucid, clearly-defined goal with which all Germans could identify and take pride. This lack of a common goal was all too clear to Bernhardt. “We no longer have a clearly-defined political and national aim which...moves the heart of the people and forces them to unity of action,” he lamented, “A great danger to the healthy, continuous growth of our people seems to me to lie in the lack of it.”<sup>9</sup> Bernhardt acknowledges that “such a goal existed, until our wars of unification” but the German people had since lost the martial, unifying fire that he believes led them to victory in 1864, 1866, and 1870-71.<sup>10</sup> In his view a new objective must be established for Germany to continue her ascent on the world stage, but what would that goal be and what would its accomplishment entail?

One such solution was found in trying to convince the newly unified German populace to see themselves as subjects of a formidable world power worthy of fear and respect on the global stage. According to Bernhardt, Germany had not yet gained such recognition. “If we look...at the position of Germandom in the world, we must admit with a bleeding heart that the political position of the German Reich in no way corresponds to the cultural worth of the German people,” he wrote in a 1912 treatise titled *The Inevitability of War*. “Our position in the world is

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<sup>8</sup> Christopher Clark. *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 556.

<sup>9</sup> Bernhardt, *Next War*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

threatened to the same degree; indeed, it is still impossible to speak of the German Reich as having a genuine world standing as such.”<sup>11</sup> Bernhardi deduced that acquiring the desired reputation would require a resurgence of martial spirit and, if necessary, belligerent action, telling his countrymen “we must have the courage to strive with every means to attain that increase of power which we are entitled to claim, even at the risk of a war with numerically superior foes.”<sup>12</sup>

Bernhardi was not alone in believing Germany should seek to cement itself as one of the foremost global powers. Bernhard von Bülow, who served as German Foreign Minister from 1897-1900 and then German Chancellor from 1900-1909, was a staunch proponent of Germany asserting herself as a world power. He realized that politics had become “more and more concerned with the world at large. The path of international politics lay open to Germany, too, when she had won a mighty position on a level with the older Great Powers. The only question was whether we should tread that new path, or whether we should hesitate to undertake further hazardous enterprises for fear of compromising our newly acquired power.”<sup>13</sup> During his tenures as Foreign Minister and Chancellor, Bülow worked tirelessly to establish “an international policy based on the solid foundation of our position as one of the Great Powers of Europe...It is the task of our generation at once and the same time to maintain our position on the continent,” he continued, “and to foster our interests abroad as well as to pursue a prudent, sensible and wisely

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<sup>11</sup> Friedrich von Bernhardi. “The Inevitability of War: General Friedrich von Bernhardi (1912).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed October 7, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=775](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=775)

<sup>12</sup> Bernhardi, *Next War*, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Bernhard von Bülow. *Imperial Germany*. Translated by Marie A. Lewenz (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1914), 13.

restricted international policy, in such a way that the safety of the German people may not be endangered, and that the future of the nation may not be imperiled.”<sup>14</sup>

On the surface, it appears Bülow viewed Germany’s standing among other world powers in a similar light as Bernhardi, but that the former crafted his policies with a less bellicose mentality than the latter. But Bülow was not always consistent in his pursuit of elevating German power through peaceful channels. In 1897, for example, Foreign Minister Bülow made a speech containing several aggressive interjections. This particular speech was intended to defend the Reich’s decision to dispatch warships and troops to China in response to recent murders of German and catholic missionaries, but it is clear the foreign minister had other motives. “The days when Germans granted one neighbor the earth, the other the sea, and reserved for themselves the sky, where pure doctrine reigns—those days are over,” he began, amongst interjections of loud applause. He proceeded with a list of demands for China, including guarantees of future safety for German missionaries and merchants. In closing, however, it became clearer that Bülow’s words were not only directed at China: “In short, we do not want to put anyone in our shadow, but we also demand our place in the sun. True to the tradition of German policy, we will make every effort to protect our rights and interests in East Asia and West India—without unnecessary harshness, but without weakness either.”<sup>15</sup> Although much of the speech was clearly aimed at China, it is obvious certain portions were directed at Germany’s rivals. When referring to granting one of Germany’s neighbors “the earth, the other the sea,” it is clear Bülow is referring the French and the Russians, who both sought to expand their power in the Far East, and British naval and colonial hegemony, respectively. By expanding German

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>15</sup> Bernhard von Bülow. “Bernhard von Bülow on Germany’s ‘Place in the Sun.’” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed October 8, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=1371](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1371)

interests into China, Bülow sought to elevate the German Empire onto the same level of global prestige as that of Russia, Britain, and France. Moreover, Bernhardt was also taking note of the age-old view of Germans as a dreamy people of poets and thinkers who had no interest in matters of practical power politics. Like Bismarck, with his “blood and iron” speech, Bülow was trying to shift the image and perception of Germans as a wistful, romantic, other-worldly people—while also claiming for Germany what seemed the self-evident reality that a new, powerful German Empire ought to have a world power-political status commensurate with its economic and military might.

In December 1899, Bülow again made a key address to the Reichstag in which he outlined his vision for German foreign policy in the approaching century. He began by reminding the legislature that the British, French, and Russians spent much of the nineteenth century expanding their colonial empires. Noting that the strongest states appeared to be growing stronger while the feeble grew weaker, Bülow declared “It’s time, it’s high time for us...to consider the position we must adopt on the processes that are unfolding all around us...To remain immobile on the sidelines, as we have done so often in the past, either from an inbred modesty or because we have been entirely absorbed by our own inner disputes...this we cannot permit.”<sup>16</sup> His declaration was met with cries of “Bravo!” and periods of applause from the right side of the chamber, while legislators occupying the left interjected with jeers and outbursts of laughter. Undeterred, Bülow continued, attempting to channel his inner Bismarck: “If the British speak of Greater Britain, if the French speak of Nouvelle France, if the Russians move into Asia, we too have the right to a Greater Germany... We cannot and will not tolerate a return to the

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<sup>16</sup> Bernhard von Bülow. “Bernhard von Bülow on Germany’s ‘Dynamic’ Foreign Policy (December 11, 1899).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed October 6, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=2845](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=2845)

status quo at the expense of the German people.” Bülow plunged further into his speech amongst a mild cacophony of cries of approval from the right and derogatory sneers from the left, “This age of political impotence and economic and political humility must not be allowed to return. In the words of Friedrich List, we do not ever again want to be the slaves of humanity. But we will only be able to maintain a leading position if we recognize that there is no welfare for us without power...In the coming century the German people will be either a hammer or an anvil.”<sup>17</sup>

Bülow’s words also make explicit references to the traditional view of Germans as educated and intellectual, but feeble in terms of power-politics, and to Germany’s enormous new economic power. Indeed, the Chancellor’s provocations were intended as a challenge to the old perceptions of Germany and its political elite’s inability to conceptualize any alternative to simply flexing its muscles—which, it must be noted, had worked rather well for traditional powers like Britain—and demanding a place at the great-power table. This strategy, of course, could lead to all sorts of problems, yet there seems to be no conception or articulation of what we today might call “soft power,” where Germany might seek influence not by emulating the imperialist powers, but by simply promoting its economic and cultural influence—both of which had grown quite extensive by this time. Given the nature of the era, in which Social Darwinism existed at the national level in the form of “gunboat” or “big-stick diplomacy,” it was certainly too much to expect Germans to behave differently from others—especially since the empire’s very existence was owed to military conquest. Yet the inherent tension brought on by the elites’ efforts to transform the German people by using militarist, power-political methods to culturally mobilize the entire nation made the Reich’s attempts to cultivate an effective policy all the more difficult.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Bülow's declarations did not fall upon deaf ears. Yet, unsurprisingly, responses were rendered with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The Pan-German League, for example, wasted no time in establishing itself as one of the most prominent and radical interest groups in Wilhelmine Germany. The group proposed aggressive expansionist foreign and colonial policies and demanded that Germany assume a more bellicose posture on the world stage. In 1903, the league issued its most provocative set of statutes. They were noticeably influenced by those set forth by Bülow in 1897 and 1899, but with a more radical twist. The 1903 preamble began by declaring "The Pan-German League seeks to invigorate the German-national attitude, especially to awaken and cultivate the awareness that all parts of the German people belong together racially and culturally."<sup>18</sup> In order to accomplish this task, the League provided a list of policies it advocate as cornerstones of its political platform, including pledges to "fight against all forces that impede our national development" and "an active policy of pursuing German interests throughout the world, especially a continuation of the German colonial movement to the point where it produces practical results."<sup>19</sup> This declaration, steeped in radicalism, contains a view into the vulgar Social Darwinism that influenced the League's ranks. While such discussions are unfortunately outside the scope of this work, it is worth noting that statements such as those in the 1903 Statutes of the Pan-German League serve as a harbinger of things to come after the First World War. Although greatly overstepping the bounds set forth by Bülow, the basic premise set for by the 1903 statutes remained the same long after the Reich met its end.

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<sup>18</sup> "Statutes of the Pan-German League [Alldeutscher Verband] (1903)." *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed October 8, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=774](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=774)

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## The School of the Army

Many in German leadership circles, including Bernhardt, also called for radical changes to German education. In *Germany and the Next War*, Bernhardt notes the important role compulsory education plays in shaping a nation's citizens, referring to the school as "a major place...for physical and spiritual development."<sup>20</sup> However, Bernhardt and other proponents of cultural mobilization felt the current educational system was ill-equipped to create the type of German citizens they desired. Bernhardt acknowledges it was "obviously not my business to indicate the paths to such reform," but that did not stop him from offering several proposals. As with other sections of his book, Bernhardt's critiques and recommendations range from heavy-handed, yet feasible, to bizarre. Examples of the former include calls for drastic changes in curriculum, smaller class sizes, and vehement opposition to the practice of placing male and female students in the same classroom. On the other hand, there is a clear correlation between the loftiness of a proposal and the ambiguity with which Bernhardt offers a supporting argument. An example is seen in his declaration that it was the schools' primary duty to instill their students with an ardent sense of German patriotism—again without explaining what, precisely, made such sentiments "German."<sup>21</sup> "Only if national education works in this sense," he declares, "will it train up men to fill our armies who have been adequately prepared for the school of arms, and bring with them the true soldierly spirit from which great deeds spring."<sup>22</sup> Again, he describes an objective and the fruits that attaining it would bear, yet there is no elaboration on what reaching that initial objective would entail.

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<sup>20</sup> Bernhardt, *Next War*, 247.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 247-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

At their core, it is clear that Bernhardi's proposed reforms revolved around creating an ideal German (male) citizen who was thoroughly indoctrinated with pride in German history, unyielding obedience to the state, and, above all, ardent patriotism. To accomplish this task, he recommends that "First and foremost, the instruction must be more individual. The number of teachers, accordingly, must be increased, and that of scholars diminished...all teaching must be directed, more than at present, to the object of developing children's minds."<sup>23</sup> But the manner in which German children were instructed was not Bernhardi's only concern. Another key issue was that compulsory schooling ended at age fourteen, leaving a six-year gap between the end of one's education and the age of conscription. Bernhardi felt such a long period without structured, formal instruction was hugely detrimental to the young mind. "Precisely at the period of development in which the reasoning powers are forming," he argues, "the children are thrown back on themselves and on any chance influences." It was during this period, Bernhardi asserts, that "young people not only forget all that they learnt...but they unthinkably adopt distorted views of life."<sup>24</sup> He declared a "compulsory continuation school" was "therefore an absolute necessity of the age" where young men would be further nurtured into mentally and physically strong standard-bearers of patriotism.<sup>25</sup>

On the surface, Bernhardi's proposals are rather straightforward in that they sought to train the German mind to be not only patriotic, but also literate as well as proficient in mathematics and critical thinking—characteristics thought to be essential for a competent soldier on the modern battlefield. There are certainly merits to the idea. As Geoffrey Wawro found in his studies of the Austro- and Franco-Prussian Wars, one clear advantage the Prussian army held

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 253.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

over its adversaries was that all its soldiers—from officers on the General Staff down to the lowliest private—were literate and numerate, no doubt the product of Prussia’s compulsory education system, a reform that the French and Austrian empires had not yet adopted. This meant they could competently view and assess models, drawings, and maps, and take part in complex field exercises. They were also capable of receiving more specialized training in marksmanship.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the Prussian soldiers’ advantages in mental competency allowed them to maneuver and fight across the battlefield in nimble twenty-man platoons instead of the conventional linear formations made of tightly-packed masses of men, as had been convention in European warfare for centuries. These tactics allowed Prussian units to close with, outflank, and overwhelm their adversary with unprecedented skill and speed. During the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, for example, most engagements saw Prussian soldiers killing, wounding, or capturing five Austrian soldiers for every casualty of their own.<sup>27</sup>

However, the proposals Bernhardi put forth also rested upon the paradox that a youth trained for military service should be proficient in critical thinking and able to think for himself while also offering unquestionable obedience to the state and to his commanders. The consequence was that reform efforts in German education met varied results. While compulsory continuation schools were not established, many secondary schools did undergo a radical transformation. Gottfried Fischer, a high school student in Upper Silesia, wrote of the resulting changes with disapproval. The “teacher-caricatures,” as he described them, “contented themselves each day by covering the prescribed dosage of instruction” before “rushing off to their patriotic discussions in the local pub. If we, a small group, moved by our natural, youthful

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<sup>26</sup> Geoffrey Wawro. *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 43-4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-4.

urge towards knowledge, had not taken it upon ourselves to expand our own horizons, we would have grown up like barbarians.”<sup>28</sup> Based on Fischer’s descriptions, it seems secondary schools like his, in their attempts to implement patriotism at the pinnacle of educational training, ironically allowed the rest of its instructional areas—to include essential skills like mathematics—to suffer from neglect.

While Fischer’s writings illustrate a distaste for nationalist education, they also reveal that the program met at least moderate success. “Nationalism was flourishing here,” he wrote just before the war’s outbreak, “The house of the Hohenzollerns, Kaiser Wilhelm, the Prussian princes and generals were the admired, idealized figures. Their lack of intellectual education, their disdain for cultural values was almost an official program.”<sup>29</sup> Yet the successes were neither all-encompassing nor far reaching. It should be noted that, while Fischer was producing the writings cited in this section, anti-war protests were erupting throughout the German Empire—over 300 before 30 July 1914. Still, when war erupted that August, over a quarter million Germans—over half under age twenty, the age of conscription—volunteered for service in the first month alone.<sup>30</sup> While this turnout is impressive, it is certainly not indicative of the entire population’s support for the war—particularly in its later stages. In June 1918, for example, U.S. Marine Private Kenet Weikal wrote of a German prisoner who had spent the previous two years hiding in a forest, with the help of his mother, in order to avoid the front.<sup>31</sup> Dennis Showalter’s study of the German Army during the First World War notes that such

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<sup>28</sup> Gottfried Berman Fischer. “Secondary Schooling for Boys: Memories of a High School Student in the Upper Silesian Town of Gleiwitz on the Eve of the First World War (Retrospective Account).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed October 8, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=742](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=742)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Dennis Showalter. *Instrument of War: The German Army 1914-18* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2016), 40-1.

<sup>31</sup> Private Weikal’s letter can be found in Albertus Wright Catlin and Walter Alden Dyer. *With the Help of God, and a Few Marines* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1919), 193-4.

instances of young German men—especially those from the rural areas, like the prisoner described in Pvt. Weikal’s letter—attempting to delay entry into the war-time army or to avoid it altogether was a widespread phenomenon in the war’s latter half. The decline in German passion for military service is also clearly visible in the desertion rate’s uptick over the war’s latter half, which doubled and then tripled in 1917 and 1918, respectively.<sup>32</sup> There was a corresponding drop in moral over the war’s final months both at the front and at home. It appears the education system was adept at producing students who were either unquestionably obedient to authority or a free thinker, but rarely both. It is also clear that, although cultural mobilization succeeded in providing millions of soldiers eager to risk life and limb in the war’s early years, it could not withstand the strain imposed by continuous participation in total war.

### **Effects on the Army**

On 27 July 1900, Kaiser William II addressed a contingent of German troops departing for the Far East to suppress the Boxer Rebellion in China. “The German Empire has, by its very character, the obligation to assist its citizens if they are being set upon in foreign lands,” the emperor began, “The means that make this possible is our army.”<sup>33</sup> Realizing the opportunity at hand to display German military might, William called upon his soldiers to “Show the old Prussian virtue” when confronting their enemy. At the end of his speech, however, the Kaiser lost control of himself, exclaiming “Should you encounter the enemy, he will be defeated! No quarter will be given! Prisoners will not be taken! Whoever falls into your hands is forfeited. Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed

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<sup>32</sup> Showalter, *Instrument*, 235-7.

<sup>33</sup> Wilhelm II von Hohenzollern. “Hun Speech” (1900). *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed October 13, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=755](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=755)

by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.”<sup>34</sup>

The “Hun Speech,” as William’s outburst came to be known, was met with reactions that were both strong and mixed. On the one hand, moderate and left-leaning politicians and newspapers condemned the murderous actions advocated by the Kaiser. The accompanying media storm generated one of the more tumultuous public relations fiascos of William’s reign. Reaction among the troops was far different. During the first days of mobilization, for example, troop trains had been adorned by slogans such as “Express Train to China,” but after the Kaiser’s speech departing soldiers began writing phrases like “Revenge is Sweet” and “No Pardon” on their transports.<sup>35</sup> As Isabel Hull shows in her study of Imperial German military culture, the army adopted particularly brutal standard operating procedures during its ensuing colonial wars in the first decade of the twentieth century. “In engagements large and small,” Hull finds, “the Imperial German military repeatedly resorted to terrific violence and destruction in excess of Germany’s own security requirements or political goals.”<sup>36</sup> While portions of Hull’s study are overbearing—and do not contend with the fact that other European nations used similarly destructive techniques—her work does provide an excellent narrative of the army’s slow descent into institutional extremism. This transformation coincided with larger efforts at cultural mobilization; we can thus deduce that such efforts to transform German culture also deeply affected the army. The logical inference is that, as attempts at cultural mobilization progressed and made headway, the army adopted increasingly constraining dogmas on itself, the result of which hindered its planning and operational capabilities as it approached the First World War.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Isabel Hull. *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006.), 135-6.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1.

One such example of institutional extremism is seen in how, after 1900, German military leadership viewed international laws of war. For instance, signatories of the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907—a pact which Germany signed—pledged to refrain from military practices that would “spread suffering beyond the fighting troops.” These activities included bombarding undefended cities, using weapons deemed cruel and unnecessary, and using occupied civilians for military purposes.<sup>37</sup> Despite Germany’s participation in the conventions, her army never hesitated to ignore the Hague rules if need be. Hull points out the fact that, while Britain and France were quick to reprint the regulations in their manuals, the German army did not. The Hague Conventions were not included in German field manuals until December 1911—twelve years after their initial publication. Moreover, Hull’s study finds that German recruits received virtually no instruction on the laws of war because, of the twenty books used for their training, only one contained any mention of the Hague rules. That book was first published in 1917.<sup>38</sup>

This disregard of international law is most telling. It shows that the Kaiser’s alarming call for the murder of Chinese prisoners, and his soldiers’ embracement of the idea, did not exist in a vacuum. It also demonstrates that the army’s institutional structures were radicalizing. Although a far cry from the genocidal monstrosity that would fight Germany’s battles in the Second World War, the Imperial German Army had clearly become an instrument that used vague descriptions of “military necessity”<sup>39</sup> to justify the employment of whatever practices were necessary to win. A stark example came on 22 April 1915, when the German army became the first military in history to unleash chlorine gas against Allied troops near Ypres, Belgium.<sup>40</sup> The use of poisonous gas was a clear violation of the Hague Conventions (specifically, the clause forbidding

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 119-20, 128.

<sup>39</sup> For a full-length discussion of the term, see Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 122-3.

<sup>40</sup> John H. Morrow, Jr. *The Great War: An Imperial History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 78-9.

the use of cruel weaponry) but, in light of the German military's disregard for such rules—as seen in their lack of publications on, and training in, such matters—one can deduce why the Imperial Army chose to unleash such a horror on its enemies; it was militarily necessary, they thought, to achieve victory. In the German military mind, that necessity to win far outweighed any limitations imposed by law.

Cultural mobilization also affected the ways in which the German army formulated operational doctrine as well as its corresponding activities in war planning. To begin with, a stark sense of hubris, brought on by the memories of one major victory after another between 1864 and 1871, permeated army ranks and German society as a whole after the turn of the twentieth century. Those lopsided victories against Denmark, Austria, and France fueled a myth of invincibility that clouded the minds of many a German strategist. For an example of this overconfidence, we can turn to the international outrage spurred by the British army's harsh treatment of civilians in occupied areas during the Boer War (1900-1902). In subsequent negotiations regarding the future treatment of civilians in occupied areas, Germany and Russia consistently argued as though they would always be the occupying power. Isabel Hull points out that, for Russia, this stance made sense because its empire's autocratic nature meant its very existence was essentially one of occupation. Germany, however, was far less susceptible to social unrest and armed uprising. Thus, Germany's stance on the matter is an indicator that its government always saw itself as the victor in a potential conflict, and that this victory would entail German troops successfully fighting their way into foreign lands. This stance makes it clear that, to the German government, it was inconceivable that Germans might ever lose an

armed conflict, suffer occupation at the hands of a victorious adversary, or subsequently require the protections international law provided to occupied peoples.<sup>41</sup>

This phenomenon is plainly seen in German war planning during the final years before the First World War. The Schlieffen Plan, which the next chapter will discuss in greater detail, was the strategy used by the Imperial Army when hostilities began in August 1914. The plan was nothing short of an audacious gamble, calling for an all-or-nothing thrust into northern France by way of neutral Belgium while leaving a small contingent in East Prussia to guard against Russian incursion. The original 1905 memo on which the plan was based acknowledged the French would possess numerical superiority against the invading German formations but military leaders then and in 1914 nevertheless believed the Imperial Army could overcome these disadvantages and defeat France in a mere six weeks.<sup>42</sup> The plan was reckless and unrealistic, but its acceptance highlights a major flaw brought on at least partly by the cultural mobilization movement: overconfidence in the fighting qualities possessed by the German soldier, and misplaced faith in the infallibility of German military leadership. “The German military was obviously susceptible to the myth of the romantic military genius,” Hull concludes, “The more daring, even foolhardy, the plan the more it fitted the trope of intuitive genius.”<sup>43</sup>

Aside from its grand, borderline delusional objectives and aspirations, what is most remarkable about the Schlieffen Plan was its lack of a contingency plan for what the German army would do if it failed to force a French capitulation in six weeks. Simply put, there was no plan B. The General Staff’s failure to develop a feasible defensive strategy to enact should the

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<sup>41</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Full transcripts of the 1905 memo, as well as earlier drafts and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger’s comments on them can be found in Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, translated by Andrew and Ava Wilson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958), 135-76.

<sup>43</sup> Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, 172.

Schlieffen Plan fail is as puzzling as it is inexcusable. The fact that Germany adopted this all-or-nothing offensive gamble as its sole plan for future conflict—which most military minds throughout Europe agreed would be the largest, most complex, and potentially most destructive conflict the world had ever seen—is telling. It is important because, as Wayne Lee has argued, any exploration of the events of a war, in or around a battlefield, must surely remain an exploration of choices. Culture, he continues, is the major driving-force behind those choices.<sup>44</sup> German military leadership chose to adopt the Schlieffen Plan, and they chose to focus all their planning efforts on it and it alone in the years leading up to World War One. Early twentieth century German culture explains this rigidity. Considering the effects that decades of cultural mobilization and hubris had taken on the German mind, one can simply conclude that defeat was unthinkable within German leadership circles. The myth of invincibility which surrounded the German army had become so strong that, by 1914, Germany was willing to risk its future on a single roll of the dice.

## **Results and Conclusions**

In theory, German attempts at cultural mobilization were characterized by ambiguous, lofty objectives. In practice, they met correspondingly mixed results. There were some successes. Although true universal conscription was not attained, for example, the army did considerably expand its active-duty personnel—from 622,483 officers and men in 1910 to 800,646 at the beginning of 1914—after Bernhardt published his book in 1911.<sup>45</sup> The pool of trained reservists was also expanded, which permitted the German army to increase its fighting strength from

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<sup>44</sup> Wayne E. Lee. "Mind and Matter-Cultural Analysis in American Military History: A Look at the State of the Field." *The Journal of American History* 93, No. 4 (March 2007), 1118.

<sup>45</sup> "Strength of the German Army (1890-1914)." *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed February 22, 2019. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=795](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=795)

808,280 to 3,502,700 within just twelve days of the war's outbreak in 1914.<sup>46</sup> This expansion affected more than the army's manpower pool, it also served as a mechanism of unity for the empire—a state whose people were still finding their way as a unified population even after the turn of the twentieth century. As Dennis Showalter points out, during those trying years the conscription process became a common rite of passage that “certified male adulthood” whether one was assigned to active duty or not.<sup>47</sup> All young men subjected to conscription were not given orders for active service, yet the practice served as a common experience that all German male youth had in common. While the expansion of conscription did not reach the levels prescribed by rabid militarists like Bernhardt, it is impossible to dismiss the draft's cultural impacts.

When war did come, the years of cultural mobilization again yielded mixed results. There were hundreds of anti-war demonstrations throughout the July Crisis in 1914, yet very few mobilized reservists failed to report for duty after the declaration of war in August. Furthermore, the German people did not jubilantly flock to the colors, as Bernhardt had hoped. While elated crowds did take to the streets in major cities like Berlin and Hamburg, it was far more common for men to report to the barracks with sobbing wives, mothers, and children in tow. Despite these reservations, mobilization met no significant opposition and there were practically no desertions.<sup>48</sup> Cultural mobilization, then, was at least partially successful. That triumph allowed Germany to send millions of men off to the front, but would the success's partiality be enough to overcome Germany's enemies?

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<sup>46</sup> Alexander Watson. *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I, The People's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 73.

<sup>47</sup> Showalter, *Instrument*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Watson, *Ring of Steel*, 73-5.

## CHAPTER 5

### FALSE MEMOIRS AND REAL TRAGEDY: HUBRIS AND THE SCHLIEFFEN PLAN

In 1913, Crown Prince William, heir to the Hohenzollern throne, gushed over the prospects of an armed conflict in the future. “The sympathies of civilized nations are today, as in the battles of antiquity, still with the sturdy and the bold fighting armies,” he declared, “the sword will always be and remain until the end of the world the decisive factor...It is only by reliance upon our brave sword that we shall be able to maintain that place in the sun which belongs to us, and which the world does not seem very willing to accord us.”<sup>1</sup> Germany, in the mind of the Crown Prince and many of his generation, had been forged in war. To them, the lesson of history seemed clear: in a world of threatening enemies, only war could preserve the German nation. This belief, though, concealed a misreading of history that would lead to disaster for Germany.

Germany’s decision to plunge its people into the First World War has challenged historians for decades. Despite earlier, and continuing, attempts to assign blame for the outbreak of war to a single ruler or state, the reasons for war in 1914 remain far too complex to be reduced to a simple explanation. Examining Germany’s 1914 invasion of France does, however, offer insights into the rationale behind the German decision for mobilization and war. When the conflict began on 4 August, the Imperial German army implemented its only contingency plan for a European war: the Schlieffen plan. It called for a small force to remain in East Prussia to guard against Russian incursion. Meanwhile, the rest of the army would occupy positions along the Franco-German border in the west. The vast majority of these forces would assemble to the

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<sup>1</sup> Crown Prince Wilhelm von Hohenzollern, *Germany at Arms*. Cited in *Records of the Great War, Vol. I*, ed. Charles F. Horne, *National Alumni* 1923. <https://www.firstworldwar.com/source/crownprincewilhelm1913.htm>

north and invade northern France by way of neutral Belgium and Luxemburg. The smaller force in the south would tie down French forces in Alsace and Lorraine while the larger body swept in from the north in a massive flanking attack aimed at annihilating the French army. If this *Kesselschlacht*, or cauldron-battle, could be won within six weeks, France would (theoretically) be defeated. Germany would then shift its forces to the east and repulse the anticipated Russian invasion.<sup>2</sup>

In reality, Germany in 1914 was not prepared for a two-front total war against opponents whose strength was growing rapidly. Moreover, German grand strategy centered on an audacious invasion plan that required speed, flawless execution, and a great deal of luck to achieve the desired result. Germany's Chief of the General Staff in 1914, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger—nephew of the illustrious Helmuth von Moltke who had directed military operations in the Wars of Unification—was skeptical whether the plan could succeed at all.<sup>3</sup> His concerns were not without reason. German military leaders were well aware they lacked a sufficient number of troops to carry out such a large operation.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Russian railway system underwent drastic improvements in the years before the war, and its military had more than recovered from its humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5.<sup>5</sup> Considering these deficiencies, why did Germany go through with such a reckless attack? An obvious answer is that Germany found herself surrounded by strong enemies whose forces were getting larger and more powerful with each passing year. Historians have argued that many in the Reich's

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<sup>2</sup> John H. Morrow, Jr. *The Great War: An Imperial History* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Annika Mombauer, "A Reluctant Military Leader? Helmuth von Moltke and the July Crisis of 1914," *War in History* 6, no. 4 (1999), 417.

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, "War Against France," cited in Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth*, translated by Andrew and Ava Wilson (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1958), 141.

<sup>5</sup> David Stephenson, *Cataclysm: The First World War as Political Tragedy* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 17-21.

leadership, including the younger Moltke, simply believed they had no other choice than to strike hard before the French and Russians' armed expansion cemented an insurmountable advantage.<sup>6</sup> Their decision, then, was at least partly fueled by desperation.

That assertion is true, but it is only a partial explanation. Many German leaders, notably Friedrich von Bernhardi and the younger Moltke, had enshrined a memory of national heroes such as Moltke the Elder and Frederick the Great. These memories, it seemed, offered German leadership hope and encouragement that the Schlieffen Plan might yet work. However, those memories were often built upon flawed understandings of German history. The Elder Moltke's accomplishments in 1866 and 1870 were monumental, to be sure, but many of his later successors did not fully appreciate the beneficial incompetence which plagued his Austrian and French opponents. Nor did they appreciate the astute diplomacy of Otto von Bismarck, which had largely guaranteed that both wars would be fought in isolation and would not escalate into continental conflicts. Frederick the Great offers an even more ambiguous and contested legacy. While German leaders of the early twentieth century made constant references to Frederick's triumphs in the Seven Years' War, despite being surrounded by enemies and vastly outnumbered, they forgot—or overlooked—the reality that Frederick spent most of the war in a state of despair and succeeded more through wearing his enemies down and good fortune than through quick, decisive battlefield victories.

This chapter shall argue these misconstrued interpretations of national memory offered German leadership hope and encouragement that the Schlieffen plan, despite the obstacles it faced, might provide the basis for an acceptable military victory. When considering their disadvantages, it is clear that a remarkable case of hubris permeated German military leadership

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<sup>6</sup> Holger H. Herwig, "Germany and the Short-War Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?" *The Journal of Military History* 66, no. 3 (Jul. 2002), 691-92.

in the months leading up to the First World War. This gross—and, as this chapter will show, largely unfounded—brashness, ironically fueled by desperation derived from Germany’s increasingly precarious strategic situation, insinuated itself within German strategic thought and blinded many military planners to the stark reality facing their nation. If Frederick could triumph—apparently through audacious, risky actions—in a far more perilous situation, then it might just be possible, again through bold action, to deliver Germany from a similarly threatening predicament. Overlooked, though, was the fact that Frederick’s gambles rarely aimed at a total defeat of his enemies, but rather at gaining a favorable position for negotiation. In 1914, however, the intent of German military leaders was unclear: did they aim at a complete victory through rapid action (such as they thought Frederick had done and as had been allegedly achieved in 1870), or did they merely hope for a more favorable military position from which to achieve a negotiated peace?

### **Memories of Frederick the Great**

There was, at the time, arguably no figure in German history more revered by German military thinkers than Frederick II, King of Prussia—more commonly known as “Frederick the Great.” A courageous leader and brilliant tactician, Frederick is often remembered as the embodiment of Prussian military excellence. There is little wonder why, from his death in 1786 to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Prussian and, after 1871, German military and political writings alike were replete with admiration for the great king. One generation of German leadership after another often looked to Frederick’s example for guidance while striving to emulate Prussia’s last true soldier-king.

On a personal level, Frederick was a fascinating man. He was a consummate intellectual whose thirst for books was so insatiable he created a mobile field library to accompany him on

his numerous campaigns. In an age when secularity was largely reserved to the fringes of society, Frederick was deeply irreligious. He was an avid writer whose published works run to thirty volumes, an accomplished musician and gifted composer, a poet, and a talented historian.<sup>7</sup> Frederick was also a king who believed it was his sovereign duty to invest in the care of his subjects. “The true wisdom of sovereigns is to do good and to be the most accomplished at it in their states,” he wrote shortly before ascending the throne in 1740, “it is not enough for them to perform brilliant actions and satisfy their ambition and glory, but that they must prefer happiness of the human race to contributing to its ruin.”<sup>8</sup> In this respect Frederick’s actions matched his words, as the king went to great lengths to expand his state’s social programs to aid Prussian subjects who fell on hard times. His government, for example, provided healthcare to wounded veterans as well as cash subsidies and job-placement programs for poverty-stricken soldiers returning home from the Seven Years’ War.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, he was also a condescending, nihilistic, vindictive man who was haunted by a tortuous relationship with his late father. Frederick the Great, a ruler who oscillated between enlightened despot and misanthrope, has fascinated and challenged historians for centuries.

Above all, Frederick of Prussia was a warrior. Despite his numerous and largely successful efforts to enhance the well-being of his subjects, he is best known for his military exploits in the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) and the Seven Years’ War (1756-63). He was a brilliant tactician who preferred to lead from the front.<sup>10</sup> Partly through his programs aimed at strengthening Prussia’s social fabric, and partly through military action, Frederick

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<sup>7</sup> Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 183-87.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick II von Hohenzollern, *The Refutation of Machiavelli’s Prince or Anti-Machiavel*. Translated by Paul Sonnino (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981), 157.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 213-14.

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Showalter, *Frederick the Great: A Military History* (London: Frontline Books, 2012), 278.

elevated his kingdom from an irrelevant, second-rate power to one of the dominant states in Europe over his forty-six-year reign. In later years, though, historians accorded his social, economic, and cultural accomplishments less notice than his military achievements. Thus, his fearless leadership and genius on the battlefield enshrined the king in the annals of German history. And it was in later confusing, or erroneously conflating, his boldness as a field general with his more cautious political aims as a statesman, that later military thinkers went astray. They remembered him not so much incorrectly as incompletely.

According to many early-twentieth century German leaders, what made Frederick “great” was precisely his characterization as a bold soldier-king who was never reluctant to draw his sword. In *Germany and the Next War*, Friedrich von Bernhardi asserts Frederick “recognized the ennobling effect of war”<sup>11</sup> whose actions constituted the axiom that “wars, begun at the right moment with manly resolution, have effected [sic] the happiest results.”<sup>12</sup> But what does Frederick say of making war? His *Anti-Machiavelli*, written shortly before his coronation, suggests a reluctant stance. “The world would be a happy place if there were no other means than negotiation for maintaining...peace among nations,” he declared reasonably, before continuing more realistically, “A disturbing necessity obliges princes to have recourse to a more cruel, ghastly, and odious way. There are occasions when it is necessary to defend the liberty of a people by arms...when it is necessary to obtain by violence what the iniquity of men refuses to mildness, and when sovereigns...can settle them only by matching their forces and committing their cause to the fate of battle.” In such cases, he concludes, “the paradox becomes true that a good war produces a good peace.”<sup>13</sup> What constituted a “good war” in Frederick’s mind? The

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<sup>11</sup> Friedrich von Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*. Translated by Allen H. Powles (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1914), 27.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> Frederick II, *Anti-Machiavelli*, 160.

king provides two classifications. First is the defensive war, in which a sovereign is obliged to use violence to defend his realm and his subjects. The second is the preventive war, in which a ruler aims to curb the rising power of a rival state before it becomes insurmountable. “It is thus better to engage in an offensive war when one is free to opt between the olive branch and the laurel wreath than to wait until those desperate times when a declaration of war can only momentarily postpone slavery and ruin.”<sup>14</sup>

At first glance, this passage supports Bernhardi’s assertion that Germany should seek war. In supporting this claim, he notes that, shortly after assuming the throne, Frederick was spurred into action because of his kingdom’s vulnerable geographic position and its untenable political status as a second-rate power. “The King made allowance for this political necessity, and took the bold determination of challenging Austria to a fight. None of the wars which he fought had been forced upon him; none of them did he postpone as long as possible. He had always determined to be the aggressor...and to secure for himself favourable prospects of success.”<sup>15</sup> To a certain degree, Bernhardi’s assessment is correct. When Frederick first went to war with Austria in December 1740, he did so with an unprovoked invasion into Silesia. Why did Frederick do this? In short, because he could. According to his early writings, the young monarch sought to increase his strength through territorial expansion. He certainly had the tools to do so. His father left him a well-equipped, disciplined, superbly trained army of 80,000 men and an impressive war chest of 8 million thalers.<sup>16</sup>

But Frederick’s actions, although daring, were not erratic. European politics were thrown into turmoil when Charles VI, Emperor of Austria, died suddenly in October 1740 without a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 161-62.

<sup>15</sup> Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 190.

male heir. When his twenty-three-year-old daughter Maria Theresa took the throne, the vultures of Europe began to circle, each looking to claim a piece of the Austrian Empire in the ensuing War of the Austrian Succession. Paying close attention to these developments, Frederick saw an opportunity and acted upon it.<sup>17</sup> His calculation paid off. He defeated the Austrians in the First Silesian War (1740-42) and in 1744 he provoked a Second Silesian War (1744-45) by launching a preventive attack on Austrian forces gathering in Bohemia. These two actions gained the king a lucrative prize and allowed him to keep it.<sup>18</sup>

Frederick's decision to invade Silesia was thus a calculated risk for an immensely valuable prize rather than a brash display of bravado, as Bernhardi wished to believe. If Bernhardi had read Frederick more closely, he might have realized that, to the Prussian king, the two examples that constituted a "good" war both entailed essentially defensive action likely to result not in a complete victory over the enemy but in a negotiated settlement. In *Anti-Machiavelli*, penned less than a year prior to Frederick's invasion, the king warns "War is so full of misfortune, its outcome is so uncertain, and its consequences so ruinous for a country that sovereigns should think twice before undertaking it."<sup>19</sup> It seems that Bernhardi—no doubt an avid reader of Frederick's writings—either overlooked or chose to ignore this passage. Moreover, Bernhardi's interpretation of Frederick's actions in 1740 misses perhaps the most important factor in Frederick's rationale: Austria at that time had several enemies and no major allies. With the armies of France and Bavaria marching on Hapsburg lands, Prussia would be one of several enemies with which to contend. There is little reason to suspect Frederick would have launched his assault had Austria not been fighting off simultaneous incursions.

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<sup>17</sup> Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 38-40.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 198-200.

<sup>19</sup> Frederick II, *Anti-Machiavelli*, 162-63.

For Frederick, the 1740 invasion of Silesia and the subsequent 1744 incursion into Bohemia were both resounding successes in the short term. However, Maria Theresa proved to possess much stronger resolve than her fellow European monarchs anticipated. When European war came again in 1756, she sought to win back Silesia, thus ensuring Prussia would be dragged into the fray.<sup>20</sup> The Seven Years' War would be far more destructive and prove far more difficult to win than Frederick's earlier campaigns. To begin with, Austria was now part of a mighty coalition with Russia, France, Sweden, and an assortment of smaller German states hostile to Frederick. The king did have a powerful ally in Britain, however the island nation shared no border with Prussia and was far more concerned with defending and expanding its overseas empire and therefore offered nominal assistance.<sup>21</sup> On the continent, Frederick stood alone.

Prussia's strategic situation in 1756 was remarkably similar to that of Germany in 1914. Both states were formidable newcomers in the European geopolitical arena, and both had climbed to their respective positions through war. Bernhardi uses Frederick's experiences in the Seven Years' War to support his claim that Germany should seek an armed confrontation in the early twentieth century. "We shall be beset by the greatest perils," he asserted, in seeming agreement with Frederick's notions, "and we can only emerge victoriously from this struggle against a world of hostile elements, and successfully carry through a Seven Years' War for our position as a World Power, if we gain a start on our probable enemy."<sup>22</sup> But what of enemy coalitions? Another similarity between 1756 and 1914 was that both nations were surrounded by hostile states intent on curbing Prussia's and then Germany's rising power. Moreover, Prussia and Germany each had one major ally, and both were unreliable—Britain because of its overseas

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<sup>20</sup> Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 116-20, 129-33.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 200.

<sup>22</sup> Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, 13-14.

priorities and Austria-Hungary because of its military ineptitude. This made little difference to Bernhardi, whose comments are worth quoting at length:

It will, of course, happen that several weak nations unite and form a superior combination in order to defeat a nation which in itself is stronger. This attempt will succeed for a time, but in the end the more intensive vitality will prevail. The allied opponents have the seeds of corruption in them, while the powerful nation gains from a temporary reverse a new strength which procures for it an ultimate victory over numerical superiority. The history of Germany is an eloquent example of this truth.<sup>23</sup>

Based on his misreading of the experiences of Frederick the Great a century and a half prior, Bernhardi theorized that Germany could succeed in a preventive war against an enemy coalition because she possessed superior moral factors. Curiously, he does not elaborate on what the allied “seeds of corruption” were, but he was certain they would corrode the coalition facing Germany and bring about its ruin. When the war Bernhardi desired did come in 1914, however, Germany would learn that alliances in the early twentieth century were far more difficult to undermine and defeat than Bernhardi anticipated, especially since its enemies felt threatened by Germany’s rise and expected to profit from its defeat—something that did not apply to the same degree to Frederick’s opponents.

In reality, the Seven Years’ War hardly constituted a sterling example of successful action in a bold preventive war. The conflict, particularly in its latter half, often did not go well for Frederick. Significantly, as if knowing that this would undermine his argument, Bernhardi failed to elaborate on its adverse aspects, such as the fact that Frederick lost as many battles as he won.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the king’s recurring predicaments caused him to fall into spells of crushing depression; he even contemplated suicide on several occasions.<sup>25</sup> His army often found itself in a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 204.

<sup>25</sup> Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 269-70.

similarly deplorable state, spending the latter half of that war living on a knife's edge and in a stance of defensive reaction. Arguably the low point for Prussia came in October 1760, when a joint force of Austrian and Russian formations arrived at Berlin. Frederick, whose army was tied down in Silesia, was powerless to stop it. On 9 October, the Austro-Russian force entered the Prussian capital unopposed. Fortunately for Frederick, their stay was short and remarkably benign. The occupying troops raided one of his palaces and seized several food stores, but most manufactories—buildings crucial to the war effort—were only slightly damaged or spared altogether. Just two days later, the joint force departed the city to meet Frederick on the battlefield at Torgau.<sup>26</sup>

Frederick's saving grace came when Empress Elizabeth of Russia died on 5 January 1762. The Empress, who detested Frederick, was succeeded by her nephew Peter II, a Duke of Holstein and ardent admirer of the Prussian king. Shortly after taking the throne Peter made peace with Frederick and ordered his armies to march alongside the Prussians. Now significantly weakened, the coalition lost its remaining cohesion as France suffered successive defeats abroad and the Austrian empire began to buckle under the immense strain caused by several years of war. The Peace of Hubertusburg was signed shortly thereafter on 15 February 1763, ending the war. It is essential to note that Frederick did not bring about this peace through a decisive battlefield victory—or through a string of them, for that matter. It was his tenacity that allowed the king to stave off defeat and wear his enemies down; it was Elizabeth's death and Peter's subsequent ascension that made the enemy coalition collapse. Prussia thus emerged victorious, but the price was tremendous. Prussian lands were devastated, its coffers emptied, and its economy left in shambles. Moreover, the war took the lives of 400,000 Prussians, roughly ten

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-84.

percent of its total population.<sup>27</sup> For his efforts, Frederick maintained control of Silesia and cemented Prussia's status as a major power in Europe. It seems the conflict depleted Frederick of whatever military ambitions he possessed when he took the throne twenty-three years prior. Until the end of his days, Frederick the Great never again led his army into battle.

### **Memories of Frederick the Strategist**

It comes as no surprise that memories of Frederick II as a strategist captivated military minds—particularly those in Germany—long after his death. Historians have noted a clear presence of the king's ideas, battles, and writings among Prussian and later German military intellectual circles.<sup>28</sup> Many, including Bernhardi, saw Frederick's Prussia as the most appropriate model for which the German Reich to follow: "We seem entirely to have forgotten the teaching which once the old German Empire received with astonishment and indignation from Frederick the Great...that what was won in war can only be kept by war; and that we Germans, cramped as we are by political and geographical conditions, require the greatest efforts to hold and to increase what we have won."<sup>29</sup>

There are certainly merits to their affection. Frederick was indeed a great field general whose remarkable victories like Rossbach and Leuthen are rightfully enshrined in the annals of German history. Pre-World War I German leaders also saw parallels between Frederick's strategic situation in the mid-eighteenth century and their own in the early twentieth. During the Seven Years' War, after all, Frederick faced a hostile coalition that seemed not dissimilar to the one Germany faced in 1914 and had few reliable allies. Every one of Frederick's enemies, at one time or another, marched into Prussian lands. Against these odds, though, and with only fickle

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<sup>27</sup> Clark, *Iron Kingdom*, 208-10.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel J. Hughes and Richard L. DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War, 1871-1918* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 34.

<sup>29</sup> Bernhardi, *Germany and the Next War*, 11.

support from a distant ally in Great Britain, Frederick prevailed. To Bernhardi, this was convincing evidence that Germany could and should launch a preventive war against her adversaries, and that she would prevail.<sup>30</sup> As always, though, the difficulty in drawing the lessons of history lies in the historical context, and rarely are two situations identical.

Upon closer examination, it is clear that Frederick's strategies and war aims were largely misunderstood by many German military leaders and historians around the turn of the twentieth century. Many simply did not grasp Frederick's true intentions. For example, Alfred von Schlieffen is known to have drawn his inspiration primarily from Frederick's experiences but he, too, often misinterpreted the king's actions.<sup>31</sup> His 1909 work *Cannae* contains numerous examples of such misconceptions. The book, published shortly after Schlieffen's retirement, analyzes the campaigns of Frederick the Great and the elder Moltke while comparing them to Hannibal of Carthage's 216 B.C.E. victory over Terentius Varo's much larger Roman force. Schlieffen refers to Hannibal's triumph, in which he encircled Varo's army and killed or captured nearly all of the latter's 85,000 men at the expense of only 5,700 of his own, as a shining example of a "perfect" victory.<sup>32</sup>

Schlieffen argues Frederick sought to defeat his enemies through similar battles of "extermination;" whereby enemy forces would be flanked, cut off, and destroyed, thereby forcing their political leadership to capitulate.<sup>33</sup> There is some evidence in Frederick's writings to support this claim. In his "General Principles of War," the king argues "Battles determine the fate of nations. It is necessary that actions should be decisive, either to free ourselves from the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 134.

<sup>32</sup> Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, *Cannae* (Leavenworth: The Command and General Staff School Press, 1992),

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 5.

inconveniences of state warfare,” or “to place our enemy in that unpleasant situation...our wars should ever be of short duration, and conducted with spirit, for it must always be against our interest to be engaged in a tedious affair.”<sup>34</sup> At first glance, this passage supports Schlieffen’s assumption that Frederick sought rapid victories over his enemies through great battles of annihilation. There are, however, three major reasons to question Schlieffen’s interpretation. First, Frederick wrote these words in 1748, after relatively easy victories in Silesia and Bohemia where he enjoyed complete surprise over an enemy whose leadership was in turmoil. Second, his Austrian adversary did not possess the coalition of allies she would enjoy eight years later. Finally, during the Seven Years’ War Frederick inflicted several debilitating losses on his adversaries yet none of them, no matter how devastating, succeeded in permanently knocking his foe out of the conflict.

Take, for example, Frederick’s renowned victory at Leuthen. To begin with, his decision to attack was less the product of bravado than of pure desperation and a complete absence of other alternatives. Evidence shows that, in the days preceding the battle, Frederick was quite uncertain about his prospects for victory. In fact the king was so uncertain about the looming combat that he made arrangements for his burial the same day he ordered his men to march toward the Austrian positions. Frederick also issued instructions, should he be killed, for his generals to swear allegiance to his brother and to negotiate a peace with France. Then, on the evening of 3 December 1757, the King summoned his generals and informed them of his decision to attack. “Relying on your courage and experience, I have prepared a plan for the battle that I shall, and must, wage tomorrow. I shall, against all the rules of the art, attack an enemy

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick II von Hohenzollern, “General Principles of War,” Article XXIII. Cited in United States Air War College Collection on Military Theory, Theorists, and Strategy. Accessed August 2, 2018. [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/readings/fred\\_instructions.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/readings/fred_instructions.htm)

which is nearly twice as strong as ourselves and entrenched on high ground. I must do it, for if I do not, all is lost. We must defeat the enemy, or let their batteries dig our graves.” Frederick then offered his generals the option to depart the field with their honor intact. No one moved. Rather, the dead silence that filled the King’s tent was reportedly broken by light sobbing. Frederick then issued final instructions to his men, informing them that he expected every regiment to do its duty down to the man, threatening reprisals should any of them cower in the face of the enemy. “Now, gentlemen, farewell,” he concluded, “by this hour tomorrow we shall have defeated the enemy, or we shall not see one another again.”<sup>35</sup>

These are not the words of a confident general on the eve of a great victory. Rather, Frederick was tired, rapidly ageing, and in a state of utter despair. Furthermore, Frederick initially anticipated a battle on equal terms. He first realized the Austrians’ numerical superiority when personally scouting their lines the day before his attack. But Frederick also noticed two factors that could be used to his advantage. First, the Austrians’ left flank was hanging in the air, leaving a significant gap between its outermost formations and a network of ponds and marshes that offered a potential geographic anchor. Second, there was a series of low hills that could offer cover and concealment for any troops attempting to maneuver on the Austrian left. Frederick would act on these discoveries, feigning a weak attack on the Austrian center while moving a considerable portion of his forces around their left. Frederick’s right wing would smash into the Austrian flank and roll up their entire line.<sup>36</sup>

It was a bold plan fraught with risks. The token forces participating in the feigning attack would have to maintain their ranks in the face of withering fire from a much larger enemy. The

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<sup>35</sup> Frederick II von Hohenzollern, “Frederick II (“The Great”) on the Eve of the Battle of Leuthen (November 28 and December 3, 1757).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed July 31, 2018. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=3890](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=3890)

<sup>36</sup> Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 196-97.

flanking forces, moreover, would have to maintain their cohesion and momentum while executing a maneuver that can only be described as an eighteenth-century tactician's nightmare. The plan succeeded—but not without help from Frederick's enemy. After cavalry scouting parties discovered the Prussian maneuver, the Austrian commander, Prince Charles of Lorraine, did nothing. Drawing from earlier—albeit misapplied—experience, Charles assumed the weak attack on his center followed by several Prussian formations making for the nearby hills on his left meant his larger force had intimidated his enemy into leaving the field.<sup>37</sup> Charles's mistakes did not end there. When the commander on his left flank, General Franz Nadasdy, noticed a large Prussian force heading toward his sector, the veteran hussar sent repeated pleas for support—all of which were ignored. Nadasdy's position was subsequently attacked and overwhelmed. It was only after his left flank had disintegrated that Charles realized what was happening. He ordered his entire army to wheel left to confront the Prussian hammer. Unfortunately for Charles, his left was already broken and eighteenth-century armies, especially those of Austria, could not turn on a dime. Frederick, having successfully turned his enemy's flank and thrown its army into disarray, ordered a cavalry charge to force the Austrians off the field and then pursue them. The Prussian cavalry chased the fleeing Austrians all the way to the Wistritz River until nightfall and heavy snows terminated their pursuit.<sup>38</sup> Against all odds, Frederick of Prussia was victorious.

Schlieffen's critique of Leuthen, and of Frederick's campaigns in general, is rather harsh. In *Cannae*, Schlieffen claims Frederick failed to annihilate his enemies partly because his cavalry lacked "vivacité," thus failing to pursue and cut down the Austrians and allowing them to retreat and regroup.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Schlieffen's interpretation of Frederick's intentions was entirely

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 200-3.

<sup>39</sup> Schlieffen, *Cannae*, 6.

incorrect. The king was aggressive, and he did seek battlefield victories through bold flanking maneuvers intended to overwhelm his enemies from a point of lesser resistance.<sup>40</sup> However he was also keenly aware of eighteenth-century-warfare's limitations. In an age where orders were passed along the lines via systems of bugle calls, drum rolls, and spoken commands, maneuvering one's troops was a daunting task even before the shooting started. Infantry tactics of the time also complicated things. Eighteenth-century battles consisted of opposing lines of musketeers blasting away at each other, often from close range, so it was nearly impossible to reform and reposition a formation once it became engaged in heavy fighting.<sup>41</sup> Frederick, who often fought outnumbered and in disadvantageous situations, was too able a field general to risk losing a war by pursuing a strategy for which he did not have enough men and that did not conform to the paradigms of eighteenth-century warfare. Schlieffen's assertion that Frederick "failed in many a battle of annihilation"<sup>42</sup> is thus as illogical as it is inconsequential. At no point in the Battle of Leuthen, for example, did the king mean to encircle or annihilate his Austrian foe, and no portion of the battle corresponded to that of Cannae, as Schlieffen claims.

The great field marshal was not Frederick's only detractor. Many of Schlieffen's colleagues, including Theodore von Bernhardt, father of Friedrich von Bernhardt, described Frederick as somewhat of a bungler and remained perplexed at how the king managed to survive the war.<sup>43</sup> Like Schlieffen, these military thinkers misunderstood Frederick's true intentions. They, too, saw the Prussian king as an aggressive field general who sought to defeat his enemies through battles of annihilation. In reality, Frederick viewed battle as a stepping-stone rather than

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<sup>40</sup> Frederick II, "General Principles of War," Article XXII.

<sup>41</sup> Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 35.

<sup>42</sup> Schlieffen, *Cannae*, 299.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of Warfare*, 4 vols, vol. 4, *The Dawn of Modern Warfare*. Translated by Walter J. Renfroe Jr., (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 371-72, 379.

a solution. Dennis Showalter has argued that, rather than seeking a battle culminating in the total annihilation of his enemy, Frederick's strategy was actually political.<sup>44</sup> For the king, victory on the field bought him leverage, space, and, often most importantly, time.<sup>45</sup> Decisively crushing a French army at Rossbach in November 1757 did not force them out of the war, but it did free up Frederick's western flank, thus allowing him to turn his attention to the Austrian forces assembling in Silesia. Likewise, his subsequent victory at Leuthen gave Frederick the time he needed to shift his focus to the northeast, where Russian forces were marching on East Prussia. Battlefield victories were thus a means to an end, intended to serve as leverage in further military operations or in pursuit of diplomatic negotiations rather than a *coup de grace*.

Frederick's geopolitical situation during the Seven Years' War was remarkably similar to the German Empire's in the early twentieth century. He was surrounded by hostile states seeking to curb his power and his only major ally could offer nominal assistance, at best. Schlieffen and his contemporaries' criticisms show they recognized the similarities but viewed and analyzed them through the wrong lens. The historian Hans Delbrück, a contemporary and intellectual sparring partner of Schlieffen's, rebuked Schlieffen's and the elder Bernhardt's criticisms. He argued Frederick sought to wear his enemies down on the battlefield and use his victories as leverage in the diplomatic courts of Europe. Delbrück reminds his readers that, shortly before the war, Frederick told his allies in England and his generals in Prussia of his plans. He talked at length about Austrian depots he planned to seize but mentioned nothing at all of a decisive battle. Rather than marching on his enemies in order to force a decisive, campaign-ending battle of annihilation, Frederick's original plan was to let his enemies approach him piecemeal so that he

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<sup>44</sup> Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 146

<sup>45</sup> Frederick II, "General Principles," Article XXIII.

could attack them one by one.<sup>46</sup> His strategy, then, more clearly resembled one of attrition (*Ermattungs-Strategie*) than that of annihilation (*Niederwerfungs-Strategie*).<sup>47</sup>

The strategy of attrition paid off. Things did not always go well for Frederick but, no matter how many times he was knocked down, the king showed an astonishing ability to pick himself back up, recover, and carry on. He also correctly assumed the coalition facing him was fragile. Internal squabbling amongst Austrian, French, and Russian leadership often hindered their ability to orchestrate decisive responses to Frederick's movements.<sup>48</sup> A diplomatic collapse amongst his adversaries and the immense strain several years of continuous warfare placed upon their state apparatuses made Frederick victorious. He did not win with a single victory. Rather, the king outwilled and outlasted his opponents.

### **The Controversial Legacy of Alfred von Schlieffen**

The Schlieffen Plan has led to numerous, often heated debates over the last two decades. For much of the last century the prevailing opinion has been that, before leaving office as Chief of the General Staff at the end of 1905, Field Marshall Alfred Graf von Schlieffen left his successor, Moltke the Younger, a grand, flawless contingency strategy for a two-front war with France and Russia. All the Younger Moltke had to do was execute his predecessor's plan and Germany would be victorious. Before the war's outbreak, Moltke allegedly altered the plan and made the decisive right wing too weak to successfully assault through Belgium and Northern France. In the war's immediate aftermath, Moltke was blamed for bungling the Schlieffen plan and ultimately costing Germany the war.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Delbrück, *The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, 341-42.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>48</sup> Showalter, *Frederick the Great*, 235, 250.

<sup>49</sup> Terrence Zuber. *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning 1871-1914*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-4.

Recent historians, notably Terrance Zuber, have argued that this interpretation is untrue. Moltke, who died in 1916, was a convenient scapegoat when Germany's military leadership scrambled to deflect blame for their defeat.<sup>50</sup> While Zuber's work caused seismic shifts in the study of Imperial German war planning, his assertion that there never was a Schlieffen plan goes too far.<sup>51</sup> There was a Schlieffen plan. It was the culmination of decades of military debate, staff rides, and war games. Like the Elder Moltke, Schlieffen spent the twilight of his career trying to create a feasible attack plan for a potential two-front war with France and Russia. In his final official publication as Chief of the General staff, he published an operational plan in a memo written in December 1905. Historians largely accept that the invasion plan implemented in 1914 originated from this memo. However, it was more of a thought exercise regarding a potential war with France rather than a concrete plan for a simultaneous confrontation with France and Russia.<sup>52</sup> The memorandum thus reflected more of an operational philosophy rather than a meticulously planned invasion strategy.<sup>53</sup> At first glance, this would seem to support Zuber's argument, as he cites the absence of a concrete, methodically articulated attack plan as his evidence that there was no plan at all. This ignores the vital fact that Schlieffen did leave behind a rough version of a plan, and there is strong archival evidence—such as Moltke's signed commentary in the memo's margins and a written document stating his general observations on the Schlieffen plan—that Moltke read and was heavily influenced by his predecessor's work.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, continuing this debate is outside the scope of this work, but it suffices to say that

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>52</sup> Gerhard P. Gross. *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke the Elder to Heusinger*. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 84-5.

<sup>53</sup> Hughes and DiNardo, *Imperial Germany and War*, 198-99.

<sup>54</sup> Seen in Moltke's marginal notes on Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, "War Against France," as well as Moltke's "General observations on the Schlieffen Plan," both cited in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, 135-7, 144, 165-7.

Zuber's argument is largely focused on semantics and that there was, in fact, some form of a "Schlieffen plan."

When assessing Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum, it is imperative to understand Schlieffen's objectives and what factors influenced his thinking. Such inquiries reveal two major discrepancies between the 1905 memorandum and the invasion plan implemented in 1914. First, it is important to note that the memorandum, whose final draft titled "War against France," envisioned just that—it was a thought exercise for a contingency should war erupt with France alone.<sup>55</sup> Secondly, it appears Schlieffen was far more preoccupied with figuring out a way around France's immense fortress system than forcing a single great *Kesselschlacht*. He worked through several courses of action including a frontal attack and an envelopment from the south but determined none were feasible. Schlieffen decided the most practical strategy was an attack from the northwest—that is, to maneuver around the fortress line entirely. The only way to make this possible, he contended, was to violate the neutrality of Belgium, Luxembourg, and Holland.<sup>56</sup> In this manner, Schlieffen hoped, he could force the French out of their defensive positions and into accepting battle on unfavorable terms. In this context, it appears Schlieffen did not seek a "super-Cannae," as historians have traditionally argued, but instead sought a campaign resembling a "super-Leuthen."<sup>57</sup>

However, it is also clear the thought exercises behind the memorandum filled Schlieffen with reservation about the prospects of invading France. The most glaring issue is that the German army simply did not have enough men to accomplish such a feat. For example, the 1905

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<sup>55</sup> Alfred Graf von Schlieffen, "War against France," Berlin, December 1905. Cited in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, 134-48.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-7.

<sup>57</sup> Gross, *Myth and Reality*, 84.

memorandum largely relied on notional units that did not exist.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, France contained multiple defensive lines which her army could fall back upon. The country's rail system was also significantly improved from 1870. Schlieffen realized this meant the French could reposition troops for a counterattack or fall back to a new position with relative ease. He hoped for the former but noted there was no way to guarantee it. Then there was the issue of Paris, which Schlieffen called "the colossal fortress." Even if the German right wing succeeded in outflanking and dislodging the French left, they would still have to contend with the city before rolling up the remainder of the French line. Moving between the city to the west and the remaining French positions to the east and south would make the advancing Germans easy prey for counterattacks on both flanks. Paris had to be invested and blocked.<sup>59</sup> The scenario became even more discouraging when Schlieffen realized France's ability to use territorial troops, which would raise their numbers to a level Germany could not hope to match.<sup>60</sup> "Make these preparations how we may," Schlieffen cautioned, "we shall reach the conclusion that we are too weak to continue the operation. We shall find the experience of all earlier conquerors confirmed, that a war of aggression calls for much strength and also consumes much, that this strength dwindles constantly as the defender's increases, and all this particularly so in a country which bristles with fortresses."<sup>61</sup>

The strategy presented in Schlieffen's memorandum was thus impracticable for a limited war against France alone. Drawing from his conclusions, basing a strategy for a two-front war with France *and* Russia on a massive, all-or-nothing attack to the west was equally unrealistic. In

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<sup>58</sup> Terrence M. Holmes. "Absolute Numbers: The Schlieffen Plan as a Critique of German Strategy in 1914." *War in History* 21, (2014), 197-8.

<sup>59</sup> Schlieffen, "War Against France," cited in Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, 139-41.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-8.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

late 1905, shortly before publishing these findings, Schlieffen had war-gamed the two-front scenario in late 1905. He noted that, should Germany enter a war with France and Russia, she would be better off adhering to Clausewitz's principle that "defense is the strongest form of warfare." Germany should await its enemies' advance, repel them, and then crush one after the other with strong counterattacks in rapid succession<sup>62</sup>—similar to what Frederick the Great had done 150 years prior.

Ironically, Alfred Graf von Schlieffen could have been the greatest voice of caution against implementing the Schlieffen plan in 1914. However, he did not adequately voice his apprehensions. His great memorandum of 1905 does say Germany would most likely become bogged down in an invasion of France and confront insurmountable disadvantages in manpower and logistics, but he never explicitly says such an invasion should not be undertaken. An even more puzzling development came in December 1912, when Schlieffen published his final memorandum titled "On a War with France and Russia." He claims that, in the diplomatic crises of 1905 and 1909, it was fear of the German army which held France and Russia in check. This was no longer the case, he continues, as the German army had lost its aura of invincibility when it was Germany which first backed down during the Agadir Crisis in 1911.<sup>63</sup> How, then, must Germany respond to a two-front war? In true German form, Schlieffen turns to historical examples for guidance, but then offers the most puzzling of solutions.

In 1866, Moltke did not leave an army on the Rhine against France, send a second against South Germany, and allow a third weak army to be beaten by Austria. And in 1870 he did not leave behind an observation army against Austria, but secured superiority over France with all the forces he could muster...Frederick the Great was ultimately of the opinion that it was better to sacrifice a province 'than split up the army with which one seeks, and must achieve, victory!' The

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<sup>62</sup> Holmes, "Absolute Numbers," 207.

<sup>63</sup> Alfred Graf von Schlieffen. "Memorandum of December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1912: On a War with France and Russia." Cited in Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, 170-1.

*whole* of Germany must throw itself at *one* enemy—the strongest, most powerful, most dangerous enemy: and that can only be the Anglo-French!<sup>64</sup>

It is odd that his solution in 1912 was to throw the whole of the German army against France and England—especially since his 1905 memorandum cogently argues such an attack against France alone was unfeasible.

What was Schlieffen's reasoning for the sudden abandonment of the logical conclusions he developed over fifteen years as Chief of the General Staff? Schlieffen died suddenly a week after writing his final memo, so his reasoning is difficult to gauge. Perhaps the changed diplomatic situation following the Agadir Crisis had profoundly affected his judgement, so that a desperate gamble on a military solution seemed the only way out of Germany's tightening encirclement. Or, viewing future developments in pessimistic terms, he might have been advocating a thinly veiled preventive attack as the only means to turn the increasingly negative military balance in Germany's favor. In any case, Schlieffen's reference to the Elder Moltke's exploits in 1866 and 1870 are inapplicable, yet telling, for three reasons. First, Schlieffen's 1912 memorandum explicitly states it is dealing with a scenario where France and Russia declare war on Germany simultaneously. He also notes that, in the decades since the Triple Alliance's creation, Russia had greatly reinforced her borders with Germany and Austria-Hungary.<sup>65</sup> This does not replicate either scenario the Elder Moltke faced. Notably, Schlieffen ignores the political factors surrounding each action and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's diplomatic efforts to keep other great powers from joining the fray. In 1866, France did not declare war on Prussia and Moltke crushed Austria's army in six weeks—before France had time to assess their options and respond to the situation—largely because his foe was plagued by poor organization,

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-2.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-70.

remarkably incompetent leadership, and antiquated firearms and tactics.<sup>66</sup> In 1870, Moltke greatly outnumbered his French foe and had no reason to worry about Austrian intervention as her armies were still recovering from the humiliating shellacking she received four years prior. Additionally, Moltke was again able to inflict a decisive defeat on his enemy in a remarkably short time, but unlike in 1866 that did not end the war. In fact, it slogged on an additional six months. Germany still had to invade the French interior, fight off partisans, and besiege Paris to force a peace. Finally, Schlieffen's overture to Frederick the Great does have its merits, however in most cases Frederick traded space for time, and he generally used his interior lines to fight a defensive war more in tune with Schlieffen's conclusions drawn from his November-December 1905 Exercise Critique.

### **Conclusion: The Decision to Act**

In the years before the outbreak of the First World War, two of Germany's greatest military minds grappled with the grave problems confronting Germany—acknowledging its precarious strategic position and numerical inferiority—but failed to devise a feasible solution to the problem of a two-front war. Why, then, in even more unfavorable circumstances, did the Younger Moltke take the offensive when war came in 1914? Gauging Moltke's thoughts on the matter is difficult because most of his personal papers were not published after the war and were subsequently destroyed by Allied bombing in 1945. Without evidence with which to defend him, Moltke has often been portrayed as an inept, weak man who was charged with carrying forward Schlieffen's ideas but failed miserably. However, the recent discovery of some of Moltke's "tactical-strategic problems" in the U.S. National Archives and subsequent research by noted historians like Annika Mombauer and Robert T. Foley has made it clear that historians have

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<sup>66</sup> Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14-6.

treated Moltke unfairly for much of the last century.<sup>67</sup> While he did not possess the brightest of tactical minds, Moltke did realize the value in rigorous military education. He tested his officers relentlessly, created and worked through his own operational philosophies, and stood up to the erratic Wilhelm II in a way his predecessor never dared.<sup>68</sup>

It is also clear that, shortly after succeeding Schlieffen, the Younger Moltke had his reservations about the operational concepts outlined in Schlieffen's writings. In January 1905, Moltke confided to his wife, Eliza, his reservations about the Schlieffen plan. He doubted whether Schlieffen understood the complexities of leading an army of millions into battle. Additionally, he dismissed the idea that such a war would, or could, be short. Moltke's correspondence with Eliza makes it clear he agreed with his late uncle's 1890 assessment that none of Germany's enemies could be overcome with a single campaign, and that a future war could not be won "until the people's energy had been entirely broken."<sup>69</sup> He was also very much aware of the large-scale violence a modern war would entail yet, as his tenure progressed, the Younger Moltke did not develop an alternative strategy.

Given his reservations, why did Moltke not seek an alternative solution? Holger Herwig argues that, once in office, Moltke quickly realized no feasible alternative existed, short of admitting war was no longer possible. Memory also played a key role. Herwig points out that, within the atmosphere of the General Staff, facilitating an open break with the brilliant Alfred von Schlieffen was unfathomable.<sup>70</sup> Moltke was then confronted by two choices—focus his strategy on Schlieffen's offensive principles outlined in his 1905 and 1912 memorandums, or

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<sup>67</sup> Robert T. Foley, "Preparing the German Army for the First World War: The Operational Ideas of Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger." *War & Society* 22, no. 2 (October 2004), 2-4.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-8, 11-14.

<sup>69</sup> Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War' Illusion," 688.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 689-91.

follow the defensive ideas Schlieffen developed in his various war games and staff rides between 1901 and 1905.

Moltke chose the offensive. It is clear that, when formulating his strategy, Moltke studied Schlieffen's 1905 and 1912 memorandums. Unfortunately for him, much of Schlieffen's work was left to interpretation. Schlieffen's writings—particularly his 1905 memorandum—were replete with mitigating words such as “if,” “probably,” “perhaps,” and “hopefully.”<sup>71</sup> Moltke's interpretations vary, but it is clear he did not agree with several of Schlieffen's ideas. For instance, Moltke recognized the necessity of outflanking the French fortress system by advancing through Belgium but thought it foolhardy to also violate Dutch neutrality. He wrote in the margins of Schlieffen's memorandum for war with France that Germany would need the Dutch railways and that the value of Holland as an ally would be “incalculable.”<sup>72</sup> In his general observations on the Schlieffen Plan, Moltke also noted maintaining Dutch neutrality would secure the advancing armies' northern flank and rear. Moreover, a neutral Holland could also serve as a “windpipe” through which Germany could import supplies, an implicit recognition that any future war would not be short.<sup>73</sup>

Moltke did, however, agree with the basic principle of the Schlieffen plan—or so he thought. In his general observations on Schlieffen's memorandum, Moltke stated he agreed “with the basic idea of opening the war with a strong offensive against France while initially remaining on the defensive with weak forces against Russia.”<sup>74</sup> This is a puzzling assertion, mainly because the memorandum in question—titled “War Against France”—makes no mention of leaving

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<sup>71</sup> Schlieffen, “War Against France.” Cited in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, 134-47. Also noted in Herwig, “Germany and the ‘Short-War’ Illusion,” 685.

<sup>72</sup> Schlieffen, “War Against France,” cited in Ritter, *Schlieffen Plan*, 137.

<sup>73</sup> Helmuth von Moltke, “General Observations on the Schlieffen Plan.” Cited in Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan*, 166.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

forces on the eastern frontier to defend against Russia. Within Moltke's 1911 observations, one also notices a gross overconfidence in Germany's fighting ability. His remarks concerning the advance through Belgium provide a good example. An attack through Belgium is the preferred course of action, he contends, because "there one can count on quicker progress. We can count on the somewhat inefficient Belgian forces being quickly scattered." He is equally haughty about overcoming the Belgian fortress of Liège. Moltke thought it was possible to take the fortress "by a *coup de main*," while also noting capturing a modern fortress in this way "would be something unprecedented in military history. But it can succeed and must be attempted...It is a bold venture whose accomplishment promises a great success." Interestingly, Moltke does not elaborate on how a *coup de main* could succeed, but he does note the necessity to have "the heaviest artillery on hand, so that in case of failure we can take the fortress by storm."<sup>75</sup>

Moltke's writings concerning a war against France and Russia contain no thought of pursuing the defensive strategy originally advocated by Schlieffen. This is most puzzling, as Schlieffen's 1905 memorandum explicitly states that Germany did not have enough manpower to successfully invade France—let alone simultaneously defend against Russian incursion. It is clear Moltke was equally aware of Germany's disadvantages. Given his reservations about undertaking offensive operations in a two-front war, one cannot help but question why the defensive strategy did not garner more attention. This question can be answered by observing a key area where Moltke broke with his predecessor. While Schlieffen eventually came around to the Clausewitzian adage that "the defensive is the superior form of warfare," Moltke disagreed. Like most military leaders of his time, he was a staunch proponent of the offensive regardless of surrounding circumstances. His observations make it clear that, in Moltke's opinion, the only

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 166.

way to defeat France “quickly and decisively” was to take the offensive and “meet the enemy in the open.”<sup>76</sup>

How did Moltke expect to accomplish this feat? In a December 1911 memorandum to German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, Moltke claimed, “wars are not decided by numerical strength alone” and that characteristics such as bravery, efficiency, discipline, and good leadership “count for more than mere numbers.”<sup>77</sup> Historians offer mixed interpretations of this passage. Annika Mombauer argues it conveys a belief that “inferiority in numbers did not need to affect German war planning,” because the German army’s moral qualities “were thought to make up for any numerical inferiority.”<sup>78</sup> Terrance Holmes disagrees, citing a later portion of the memo where Moltke adds that the moral element in war “cannot be gauged in peacetime...The only positive basis for assessing our chances in a forthcoming campaign is a comparison between the fighting strength of the two sides.”<sup>79</sup> There is merit to both Holmes’s counterargument and Moltke’s reasoning. However, Moltke never developed an alternative plan although he knew Germany did not possess adequate forces to launch a successful offensive. Moreover, when war did come, he still ordered millions of Germans forward with a battleplan that, according to decades of staff work and field exercises, was impracticable.

Why was Moltke so obstinate? The most plausible explanation is that Moltke calculated there was no viable alternative to taking an offensive posture and, like Bernhardt, depended on moral factors and his perception of German superiority to carry the day. In a memorandum sent to Wilhelm II and Bethmann-Hollweg on 29 July 1914—just three and five days before declaring

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>77</sup> Holmes, “Absolute Numbers,” 198.

<sup>78</sup> Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2005), 229.

<sup>79</sup> Holmes, “Absolute Numbers,” 198.

war on Russia and France, respectively—Moltke claimed any show of restraint would violate “in ominous fashion the deep-rooted feelings...which are among the most beautiful traits of German character and would be setting itself against all the sentiments of the nation.”<sup>80</sup> Moltke thus aimed to strike his enemies first while hoping German soldiers’ perceived moral superiority would allow them to knock at least one of his enemies out of the war in its early stages.

In hindsight, Moltke’s reasoning was rather imprudent. However, one must keep in mind the context in which Moltke developed these beliefs. He lived and worked in a time where German prestige rested entirely upon her military exploits of 1866 and 1870-1. In the minds of most prominent German military thinkers, the martial accomplishments of Frederick the Great only confirmed their beliefs of German invincibility. Moltke was thus a product of his generation. It must be remembered that Moltke’s illustrious predecessor, Schlieffen, based a majority of his operational philosophies on the exploits of Frederick the Great and the Elder Moltke. Toward the end of his career and life, Schlieffen did realize the folly of much of this reasoning but did little to expand on his reservations. While not the most ideal candidate for Chief of the General Staff, Moltke the Younger was neither a weak nor inept leader. Moltke did his due diligence, but the intellectual foundation upon which he worked had significant cracks. These philosophical discrepancies fueled a remarkable sense of hubris which, combined with an atmosphere of increasing desperation, convinced German military leaders like the Younger Moltke that a brash action such as the Schlieffen plan could work, despite ample evidence warning otherwise.

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<sup>80</sup> Helmuth von Moltke, “Memorandum to Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, July 29, 1914,” cited in Samuel R. Williamson and Russel Van Wyk, *July 1914: Soldiers, Statesmen, and the Coming of the Great War. A Brief Documentary History* (Chicago: Waveland Press, 2015), 105.

## CHAPTER 6

### “I SEE NO OTHER WAY OUT”

On 4 August 1914 the Schlieffen Plan went into motion. At long last, decades of staff work, research, and war-gaming would come down to a single role of the dice. It began almost seamlessly, with the Germans performing a marvelous logistical feat that is still admired today. Seemingly overnight, the army expanded almost fivefold as reservists from across the Reich reported to their mustering points.<sup>1</sup> The army also took in a flood of new recruits; approximately 250,000 German men, over half of which were younger than twenty, the age of conscription, volunteered for service in August 1914 alone.<sup>2</sup> Transporting such large bodies of men and material to the front was a herculean task, but the German railway and logistics systems did just that with remarkable efficiency. Using predetermined timetables for its railways, trains hauling soldiers, supplies, guns, and horses crossed the Rhine at an average rate of 563 a day.<sup>3</sup>

German troops fought their first skirmishes with Belgian and French forces along the border on 5 August. The first major contest between French and German soldiers came when France's First and Second Armies attacked into Lorraine on 14 August, only to be halted and then expelled from the province by a German counterattack six days later.<sup>4</sup> In the north, the French Third and Fourth armies attacked in the Ardennes on 21 August. That offensive was even more disastrous than the one in Lorraine, and by 23 August the surviving French soldiers limped back to their original positions with German troops in close pursuit. It seemed the French were

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Watson. *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I, The People's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 73.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Showatler. *Instrument of War: The German Army 1914-18* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2016), 40-1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> John H. Morrow, Jr. *The Great War: An Imperial History* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 40.

intent on playing right into the younger Moltke's hands—an occurrence that would need to continue for his invasion plan to succeed. In the war's opening weeks, his troops had time and again crashed into advancing French forces and decisively beaten them each time. The French army suffered tremendously, losing 260,000 killed, wounded, or missing in August alone. Horrific losses of life and limb were not limited to the French, however, as German units in the First and Second armies—the “strike armies” that constituted the decisive right wing—alone suffered over 20,000 wounded and 8,000 killed or missing in the last ten days of August; and Paris was still more than 130 kilometers away from their forwardmost positions.<sup>5</sup>

To further complicate matters, Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg and his diplomatic corps failed to replicate Bismarck's successful attempts to prevent outside powers from joining the fray. The British Empire, citing their pledge to defend Belgium, joined the Franco-Russian coalition and declared war on Germany on 4 August. It is essential to note the significance of this development. Before August 1914, Britain had not been a formal member of the Franco-Russian coalition. It is no secret that Britain was anything but a traditional friend of France—the two had fought countless wars with one another over several centuries. Anglo-Russian relations had traditionally been less hostile but were marked by suspicion nonetheless, for the liberal-minded British detested Russia's autocracy and in recent years had viewed the Czar's empire as a chief competitor for colonial influence in India and the Far East.<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite traditional antagonisms and suspicions, Britain chose to throw in its lot with the Franco-Russian coalition because Germany's attack plan—a plan fraught with uncertainties—violated Belgium's neutrality. While Britain's initial contribution on the continent was minimal—in August she dispatched a force of

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<sup>5</sup> Holger Herwig. *The Marne, 1914: The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2011), 156-7.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Clark. *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 147-50.

only 120,000<sup>7</sup> soldiers to Belgium—its financial and naval might brought support to the Franco-Russian coalition that Germany could never hope to match. Thus, it became more important than ever that Germany terminate the war in the West as quickly as possible—a scenario whose feasibility both Moltkes had clearly doubted long before the war began.

A rapid decision never came in the West. German armies succeeded in smashing their way through Belgian, British, and French lines and marched into northern and eastern France. As August gave way to September, however, the invasion gradually lost its momentum. As the now late Schlieffen had predicted nine years prior, French forces continually fell back to interior defensive positions and mounted new efforts at resistance, wearing down the attacking Germans and gradually depleting them of manpower and supplies. Despite this constant resistance, the Kaiser's armies marched on, dislodging Anglo-French forces from one position after another as they inched their way toward Paris. Between 5 and 10 September, French and British forces made their final stand on the Marne—in some places within fifty miles of Paris.<sup>8</sup> During the ensuing battle the Germans' aggressiveness—a product of the Schlieffen Plan's strict timetables and the overarching desperation to terminate the campaign as quickly as possible—cost them dearly. The German First Army, its commander pursuing personal glory as much as victory, blindly plunged his forces into a salient in the Allied lines east of Paris. The First Army was then in a dangerous position, its right flank exposed to a counterattack by French forces massing near Paris. By the time its leader, General Alexander von Kluck, realized his error, it was too late. On the morning of 6 September Anglo-French soldiers launched a counterattack on his right wing—arguably the front's most critical sector—where Kluck's forces were now outnumbered by the

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<sup>7</sup> Morrow, *Great War*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> Map of the engagement in Herwig, *Marne*, 232-3.

Allies.<sup>9</sup> Over the next several days, Allied counterattacks continued along a 125-mile front. By 10 September, Germany's First and Second armies were dangerously low on ammunition, supplies, and manpower and on the verge of collapse. The danger was all too clear to Moltke, who realized that to order his strike armies to remain in place would invite disaster. This scenario marked Schlieffen's and the elder Moltke's worst fears coming to fruition—their armies were vastly overextended, running out of men and material, and under attack by a numerically superior foe. The attack had stalled, and there would be no more going forward. Thus, the younger Moltke, now a broken man, ordered a general retreat from the Marne.<sup>10</sup> Paris was saved, France remained in the war, and, most important, Germany would not achieve the rapid victory in the West that was so essential to its chances of winning the war. The Schlieffen Plan, an all-or-nothing gamble for German victory, had failed.

Rather than coming to a quick decision, as the three wars of 1864-71 had done, the First World War would drag on for four agonizing years. The German army spent much of this time dug in on the defensive in the West, repelling one fruitless Allied offensive after another, while trying to force a decision in the East. In 1917 Russia collapsed and its succeeding regime, headed by Lenin's Bolsheviks, withdrew Russia from the war in early 1918. Germany then attempted one final all-or-nothing assault in the West but that, too, failed to bring a decision. By early autumn the German army was on its heels. All over the western front its troops were falling back toward the German frontier under the weight of a combined offensive of primarily British, French, and fresh American troops. German lines would stabilize as they neared the Reich's western borders, but it was clear there would be no victory for Germany.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 282-6.

On 1 October 1918 Field Marshall Erich Ludendorff, then the Quartermaster-General of the General Staff and right-hand man to its chief, Paul von Hindenburg, discussed Germany's hopeless situation with his colleagues. One of the staff officers present, Albrecht von Thaer, recorded the announcement in his diary. Ludendorff began by stating the obvious—Germany's military situation was “terribly serious.” It was possible, he continued, that “any day now...there might be a breakthrough on the western front...For the first time, the OHL [*Oberste Heeresleitung* or Supreme Army Command] had been asked by His Majesty, as well as the Chancellor, what the OHL and the army were still capable of accomplishing. In agreement with the Field Marshall, he had responded: the OHL and the German army were at an end; the war could no longer be won; indeed, a total defeat could probably no longer be averted.”<sup>11</sup> Thaer was shaken by the announcement, and by Ludendorff's dejected appearance. “He had never shied away from demanding the utmost of his troops but now that it had become clear to him that the continuation of the war served no purpose, he was of the opinion that it should be ended as quickly as possible, in order to avoid unnecessarily sacrificing the bravest ones, who are still loyal and able to fight.”<sup>12</sup> What followed was a remarkable, and rare, moment of humanity and vulnerability among Germany's top officers. “The effect of these words on the listeners was indescribable,” Thaer continued, “While Ludendorff was speaking one could hear a soft groaning and crying. Many, probably most of us, had tears running down our cheeks, involuntarily. I stood to the left of General Director General von Eisenhart. Involuntarily we held each other's hands. I almost squashed his.”<sup>13</sup> Thaer then followed Ludendorff out of the room, begging for clarity.

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<sup>11</sup> Albrecht von Thaer. “Erich Ludendorff Admits Defeat: Diary Entry by Albrecht von Thaer (October 1, 1918).” *German History in Documents and Images*. Accessed March 4, 2019. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=1442](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=1442)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

“Excellency, is this then the truth? Is this the last word? Am I awake or am I dreaming? This is far too terrible! What is going to happen now?” Thaer noted he was “completely beside myself,” but that Ludendorff remained calm and quiet. He then turned to Thaer and, “with a deeply sad smile,” answered “Unfortunately it is so, and I see no other way out.”<sup>14</sup>

Ludendorff’s assessment was correct. Over the following weeks, the situation continued to careen out of control. By the end of October, all of Germany’s allies had stopped fighting. Things were no better at home, as revolution began to sweep across Germany. On 9 November, Hindenburg informed the Kaiser that the army no longer supported him. That same day, William II became the first and only Hohenzollern monarch to abdicate his throne.<sup>15</sup> William then fled to Holland, where he spent the rest of his days in exile. Two days later, at 5:00am, a small German delegation agreed to armistice terms with the Allies. The killing continued for six more hours until the guns finally fell silent at 11:00am. The First World War was over, and Germany’s greatest fears had come to fruition: the Reich was defeated.

When the Treaty of Versailles was signed the following June, the German Empire became one of the First World War’s millions of casualties. The Reich was forced to surrender all its overseas colonies and cede substantial territory to the new states of Poland and Czechoslovakia. Germany was forced to accept a French military occupation of the Rhineland and its army, the unifying symbol of strength and pride for the empire, was dissolved. The army was then limited to a miniscule 100,000 men and forbidden from possessing heavy weapons such as airplanes, tanks, machineguns, and artillery. The empire’s economic predicament was also made exponentially worse by France’s exorbitant demands for war reparations. Germany’s humiliation was then exacerbated by Article 231, which left blame for the war squarely on

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Morrow, *Great War*, 278.

German shoulders.<sup>16</sup> Historians have since concluded that blaming Germany for the war was an unfair and overblown response to the war's savagery and, in 1919, some Allied delegates did speak out against the clause. Yet, it remained in the treaty despite their protests—a mistake that would fuel rage and dissent within Germany until it ignited a second world war just twenty years later.

## **Conclusions**

Just a few decades before the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was at the apex of its power. What had gone so horribly wrong? Some of the issues that led to Germany's downfall were of its own doing, others were unavoidable. The manner in which Prussia hooked and jabbed its way to German Unification certainly did not do the new empire any favors, as it destroyed the balances of power that had dictated European affairs for the previous two centuries. The sudden, violent nature of the Reich's creation was sure to sow fear and suspicion among the other European powers. Realizing this, the elder Moltke and later Bismarck advocated for a military policy based first on deterrence; meaning they believed the Reich should seek to build a war machine that was so large and so formidable that its very existence would prevent a future European war. This was a concrete goal, but it was unfeasible from the start, for it would require Germany to match the army-building programs of France *and* Russia. Germany's constitutional system also created difficulties in armaments expansion, for its vague, sometimes contradictory language all but ensured that political infighting and legislative deadlock would slow, if not paralyze, the program. Later, when William introduced a naval aspect to his empire's armaments program, Germany found itself competing with the largest and wealthiest empire in history—Great

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-93.

Britain. There were simply too many rivals, too many competing interests in the Reichstag, and not enough men and materials to keep pace with three global powers.

Germany's failure to outpace its rivals in the armaments race meant they had to search for another way to gain an edge. They turned to what they believed were Germans' superior moral factors and attempted to strengthen them through cultural mobilization. The program, advocated by the most radical sects of German leadership, sought to transform German society into a bellicose people who were morally, psychologically, and physically prepared for the tribulations of a modern "people's war." Ironically, the cultural mobilization movement was hindered from the beginning by the fact that its proponents did not know themselves what constituted "German" culture. It is clear in their writings that most advocates, notably Friedrich von Bernhardi, sought to model German society on their misconstrued understandings of traditional Prussian militarism—a notion that was sure to alienate Germans from other parts of the empire who traditionally looked toward Prussia and militarism with disdain. Cultural mobilization certainly met some success, as seen in the remarkably low desertion rate when mobilization began in 1914 and the hundreds of thousands who volunteered for service in the war's opening weeks. However, it did not live up to the standards advocated by Bernhardi and like-minded German leaders, for many of them wasted no time in blaming the home front for Germany's collapse four years later.<sup>17</sup>

In the crucial weeks preceding the war's outbreak in 1914, German leadership's belief in its soldiers' superior moral factors was strengthened by erroneous understandings of German history. There does not seem to be any evidence that German military leadership did not see the

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<sup>17</sup> When Ludendorff briefed Thaer and his fellow staff officers on 1 October 1918, he pointedly blamed the Reich's civilian leadership and the populace at home for their predicament. Cited in Albrecht von Thaer. "Erich Ludendorff Admits Defeat: Diary Entry by Albrecht von Thaer (October 1, 1918)."

Schlieffen Plan for what it was: a gamble. The Younger Moltke himself lamented the plan's uncertainties years before he ordered it into action. Yet, in August 1914, Germany went on the offensive anyway. It seems they expected the German soldier's axiomatic superiority over his foes would allow the Imperial Army to defy the odds and vanquish its chief adversary, France, in a single offensive. Much of that decision was influenced by misconstrued memories of historic German—or, more accurately, Prussian—heroes and their accomplishments on the battlefield. They looked to the Elder Moltke's successes against Austria in 1866 and France in 1870-1, yet seemed to forget (or ignore) his enemies' beneficial incompetence, and that Bismarck's shrewd diplomacy had prevented outside powers from entering the fray.

The German military's obsession with Frederick the Great is best described as ironic. To them, Frederick was the very embodiment of the great Prussian warrior, the last true soldier-king. While Frederick certainly was a military genius, it is also ironic that, at his core, the great king personified traditional German traits that Bernhardi and other proponents of cultural mobilization sought to expunge from society. In his early years, Frederick had never wanted to be a soldier. Instead he was a dreamer, a consummate intellectual who was captivated by philosophy, poetry, music, and art. In his later years, Frederick saw himself as a servant to his people, working tirelessly to improve their well-being and to make his kingdom a beacon of enlightenment in Northern and Central Europe. Moreover, Frederick's exploits on the battlefield hardly constituted a sterling example for the Imperial German Army to follow. While Frederick did engineer some of the greatest military victories of his age, he almost never fought them from a position of strength. In fact, Frederick's experience in the Seven Years' War—an oft-cited example by Bernhardi, Schlieffen, the younger Moltke, and countless other German leaders—is best describe as a continuous state of despair. Frederick and his army spent most of the war

living on a knife's edge, constantly marching from one region to the next in response to the latest crisis. However, Prussia was victorious. Its triumph was not due to a single decisive battle or campaign, as the Reich would seek a century and a half later. Rather, Frederick the Great outwitted and outlasted his opponents, wearing them down year after year until the coalition opposing him lost its cohesion and collapsed.

In the Wilhelmine era, Germany's military policy was a system of ambitious reactions, half-measures, and self-deception. Of its three major pillars, two were at best marginally successful while the third encouraged recklessness and arrogance. Correctly guessing it had no other choice, the Reich adopted a policy aimed at creating a military force large and strong enough to deter its enemies from future aggression. The problem was that the British, French, and especially Russian militaries had adopted similar goals and that Germany's dysfunctional legislature limited her ability to keep pace. The empire was also correct to act on the elder Moltke's warnings of a people's war in the future, however its objectives for cultural mobilization were poorly conceived and pursued change through the wrong channels. Finally, when she felt there was no other choice but to attack, Germany's leadership clung to misconstrued memories of German history to convince themselves their audacious invasion plan could, in fact work. When their gambled failed, millions of Germans had to foot the bill.

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