
LESSON 7

LATTER 19TH CENTURY WARFARE: PRUSSIA

Introduction

Purpose This lesson will introduce you to 19th century Prussian Army reorganization.

Why Study Prussian Reform and WW I? The Prussian Army reorganization continues to have an impact on United States armed forces' planning and organization today.

Relationship to Other Instruction This lesson focuses on matters central to the evolution of modern warfare in the latter part of the 19th century and into the First World War.

Lesson Topics This lesson focuses on Prussian 19th century military institutional developments, especially the general staff and its approach to war.

Study Time This lesson, including the issues for consideration, will require about 3 hours of study.

Educational Objectives

Moltke's Influence Understand the significance of the Prussian Army's reorganization and the accomplishments of the General Staff under Moltke.
[JPME Areas 3b and 3d]

Professionalism Understand the ramifications of the concept of a "professionalization" race.
[JPME Area 5a]

German General Staff Model In examining the continuing impact of the German General Staff model, analyze its

- Successes
- Failures
- Relevance to the military organizational problems of the United States.
[JPME Area 1e]

**JPME Areas/
Objectives/Hours
(accounting data)** 1/e/0.5
3/b/0.5
3/d/1.0
5/a/0.5

Historical Background

European Reaction to Napoleonic Warfare

Napoleon's campaigns presented European rulers and their military leaders and theorists with a style of warfighting that they found difficult to understand and defend against. A large, highly motivated army that had rapid mobility and substantial firepower completely overpowered the mercenary armies of Europe.

Most Germans found it difficult to understand Napoleon's system. It combined his exceptional individual gifts with the social, administrative, and psychological achievements of the French Revolution. Most theorists found it even more difficult to recognize that Napoleonic strategy and tactics were historical phenomena that were subject to change rather than representing the ultimate in the conduct of war.

In Prussia, men of vision saw Napoleonic warfare as a product of the political, social, and economic changes wrought by the French Revolution. Instead of attempting to return to the status quo, as other European nations did in the general conservative reaction following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the Prussian military adapted their army to this new type of warfare.

19th Century Prussian Military Revolution

During the years following the Peace of Vienna, while avoiding active participation in European wars, the Prussian army was transformed into the most powerful force on the continent. Scharnhorst and Gneisenau, mentors of Clausewitz, played significant roles in establishing both the new Prussian school of military thought and the Prussian general staff. Beyond the creation of a highly skilled officer corps and general staff, a key aspect of this "Prussian Military Revolution of the 19th century" was the inclusion of planning for war **before** a conflict began and then executing such plans.

Dr. Ted Ropp of Duke University coined the phrase "the Prussian military revolution of the 19th century." This military revolution

wLed to quick, unexpected Prussian victories over Austria and France in three wars. This led to the creation of a unified Germany out of a German confederation that had consisted of 37 separate states.

wProvided a model for other European states that is still studied extensively by military professionals and scholars.

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Historical Background, Continued

Profession- alization Race

A key to understanding the Prussian approach to institutionalizing war-making within the state was what has become known as the "professionalization race." This "race" was going on throughout most of the national states of Europe during the 19th century. A general outline of this concept consists of the following:

- Cadre-conscript armies consisting of
 - Cores of professionals and short service conscripts, backed by reserves
 - General staffs
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- Professional standards for the military
 - Pre-war mobilization and war plans
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Prussian Military Model

Helmut von Moltke's Influence

Prussian General Helmut von Moltke, as chief of staff of Germany's armies from 1857 to 1887, was given the task of bringing the armies together. He

- Considered the army an instrument of the sovereign who, to Moltke, represented the state
 - Began his restructure of the Prussian military system by developing a very refined selection system for staff officers
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Officer Selection

Only 12 from an annual graduating class of 40 officers from the prestigious *Kriegsakademie* were selected to become staff officers. Since only the most promising officers were admitted into the *Kriegsakademie*, the General Staff came to represent the military (and often the social) elite of Prussia.

Moltke's Military Educational Framework

Moltke infused this select group of officers with his perspectives and military methodology and established a military education system including

- Instruction and practical training in all arms of the service
 - Rotation between staff and line assignments to keep these staff officers in contact with field units troops and prevent an overly theoretical orientation
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Operational Training

Moltke instilled Prussian officers with a geographical perspective appropriate to the operational level of war through

- Large-scale maneuvers
 - Frequent and elaborate map exercises
 - Carefully laid out staff rides
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Moltke's Approach

By 1870, many brigade and division commanders had personally studied under Moltke. The important personal focus of Moltke's approach was at the side of every corps and army commander stood a chief of staff, who, along with his superior, was held directly responsible for the performance of his organization.

The result was a remarkable uniformity of doctrinal belief within senior command circles.

Required Readings

*Makers of
Modern Strategy*

- Holfborn, Hajo. "The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff." *Makers of Modern Strategy From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, edited by Peter Paret, pp. 281 to 295. This chapter traces the rise of the Prussian general staff and battle experiences leading to the development of Moltke's school of strategy in mid-to-late 19th century Germany.
 - Rothenberg, Gunther E. "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment," *Ibid.*, pp. 296 to 325. This chapter examines more elements of Moltke's strategy and how changing technology and circumstances caused Schlieffen to build upon, as well as break with, these elements to plan for envelopment of enemies rather than frontal attack.
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For Further Study

Supplemental Readings

The readings listed are **not** required. They are provided as recommended sources of additional information about topics in this lesson that may interest you. They will increase your knowledge and augment your understanding of this lesson.

- Echevarria, Antulio II. "Moltke and the German Military Tradition: His Theories and Legacies." *Parameters*, Spring 1996.
 - Turner, L. C. F. "The Significance of the Schlieffen Plan." *The War Plans of the Great Powers, 1880-1914*, edited by Paul Kennedy. London: Allen & Unwin, 1979.
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Issues for Consideration

**Prussian
Military
Revolution**

What is meant by the term "The Prussian Military Revolution of the 19th Century"?

**Professionaliza-
tion Race**

Could the Prussian approach to war be institutionalized? Confined to only one state? Or could others copy it, and with what consequence?

Moltke

How did Helmut von Moltke apply Prussian traditions, Clausewitzian theory, and his own strategic thought to create the most powerful army in Europe?

**Civil-Military
Relationships**

What was the civil-military relationship in the Prussian kingdom and later German empire? What were its strengths and weaknesses? How does this compare and contrast with historic civil-military relations in the U.S.?
