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MASTER'S DEGREE DEFENCE STUDIES (MDS) THESIS

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This essay affirms the continuing relevance of Moltke's approach for modern campaign planning. Field Marshall Helmuth Graf von Moltke established a structural approach for campaign planning, which in principle is still valid for NATO, and hereby created the operational level of warfare.

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INTRODUCTION

“I hereby release you from your duties as senior aide-de-camp to his Royal Highness Prince Frederick William of Prussia, and charge you with the direction of the General Staff business of the army. You are to see in this a special proof of my personal confidence in you, and my expectation is that you will justify this confidence, and discharge the important functions delegated to you in the best interests of the army.”¹ This cabinet order addressed to Major-General Baron Helmuth von Moltke and signed by Count Waldersee on 29 October 1857 on behalf of the Prussian King proved to be a decision of truly historical significance. Moltke used his influential position as the chief of the Prussian General Staff to establish his progressive ideas about campaign planning. Moltke’s military victories, which derived from his superior operational approach, enabled the Prussian chancellor Bismarck to accomplish the establishment of the German Reich under Prussian leadership.

The German Reich was overwhelmingly dominated by Prussia. After 1871, more than half of the German population lived in Prussia or her provinces and more than two thirds of the German state territory was Prussian. Prussia put a strong emphasis upon the sovereignty of the armed forces from politics and subordinated the German Commander in Chief only to the German Kaiser. Not even the powerful German chancellor was allowed to interfere in military affairs. The non-interference of politics into military affairs was definitely in line with Moltke’s considerations, but proved to be a dreadful heritage before World War I when German flag officers directly influenced the German Kaiser towards war. Politics was not even able to interfere with this direct access.²

¹ Mary Herms (Translator), *Moltke His Life and Character* (New York: Harper, 1892), 255

² Deutscher Bundestag, *Fragen an die deutsche Geschichte* (Bonn: Deutscher Bundestag Referat Oeffentlichkeitsarbeit, 1990), 201-202

Moltke was the first military planner confronted with the massive impact of technology upon warfare. His progressive thinking enabled him to view technology as an enabler rather than an obstacle for military campaigns. During the latter 19th century, the advent of railways widened the theatre of operations and thereby changed the geographical perspective of warfare. Moltke recognized campaigns could become increasingly dispersed based upon the new deployment-capabilities, and he utilized the railway system right from the beginning of mobilization. He established a small but efficient bureaucracy to harmonize the available railway assets and to determine transport requirements in line with on-going operational planning. The prepared transportation plans enabled every unit to know about and prepare in advance for its specific deployment.

As the Chief of the Prussian General Staff, Moltke successfully tackled the challenge of three progressively complex campaigns against Denmark, Austria, and France. Moltke's ideas about a consolidated concept for warfare proved to be a decisive factor within these campaigns. In particular, the successful campaign against France in 1870/71 reflected Moltke's ability to establish a sequential approach for military operations, aimed at an operational goal and based upon given strategic objectives. Moltke thereby closed the gap between strategy and tactics and improved the efficiency of military campaigns in such a remarkable way that his ideas still influence modern campaign planning.

The essential primary source to conduct an analysis of Moltke's thinking is a compendium edited by Freiherr von Schmerfeld and published in 1925 in Berlin. This compendium aims to list all written statements from Moltke, which illustrate his achievements as a strategist, historian of war, politician, researcher of cultural heritage, and philosopher in four volumes. The compendium is supplemented by important speeches about the personality and

achievements of Moltke. Even though Moltke left behind a substantial body of work in his writings and papers, he never published a comprehensive analysis of his approach towards campaign planning. Therefore, this compendium provides a unique insight into Moltke's views and his impact upon Prussian warfare. The statements from this compendium are supplemented by other sources, which quote complementary letters and memoirs from Moltke or contain necessary additional analysis for the examined subject. This thesis primarily analyzes Moltke through his own words.

Moltke's conceptions about warfare were deeply rooted in his religious and philosophical beliefs. Therefore, it is appropriate to reflect upon his "consolatory thoughts on this life, and trust in a future life" which are presumed to be his philosophical heritage, finalized just half a year before his death on 24 April 1891.³ In his final thoughts, Moltke stated: "the sovereignty of reason is absolute; she recognizes no superior authority. No power, not even that of our own wills, can compel her to regard as false what she has already recognized as true."⁴ Rationalism, originating from reason, was a cornerstone of Moltke's approach for the planning and execution of campaigns. Moltke also realized the omnipresence of causality, which he tends to call "law". He declared: "Nowhere in nature is there anything arbitrary, but everywhere law."⁵ The definition of the most probable course of action for enemy forces and the consequential determination of the one's own most favourable course of action is based upon Moltke's idea of omnipresent causality. Moltke tried to decrease the influence of chance as much as possible by emphasizing the importance of thorough logical deduction and careful thinking for campaign planning.

³ Herms, 325

⁴ Ibid, 327

⁵ Ibid, 328

The origin of warfare itself is seen as part of God's world order. In an earlier document, Moltke stated in this context: "Eternal peace is a dream, and not even a pleasant one. War is part of God's world order. War develops man's noblest virtues, which otherwise would slumber and die out: courage, self denial, devotion to duty, and willingness to make sacrifices."⁶ This statement does not mean that Moltke principally preferred war to peace. On the contrary, he denies war as a final solution: "It is possible to avoid misunderstandings with regard to all subjects except those which transcend human conception, and these are the very subjects over which men have fought and desolated the world for the last eighteen hundred years, from the extermination of the Arians, on through the Thirty Years' war, to the scaffold of the Inquisition, and what is the result of all this fighting? The same differences of opinion as ever."⁷

Moltke represented an officer with superior intellect who kept a sense of humbleness throughout his remarkable career. He believed that God's world order encompasses warfare and consequently politics can make use of this option whenever inevitable. Already Clausewitz had defined war as the "continuation of policy by other means" and stressed the fact that strategic objectives within a war are determined by political goals.⁸ Moltke, who never explained the impact of Clausewitz on his own analytical approach, utilized this observation for the implementation of a highly efficient approach for the planning and execution of military campaigns.

Moltke never intended to develop a sophisticated war-theory. He aimed instead at practical success and primarily accomplished this goal by the establishment of operational objectives for military campaigns. Moltke's operational objectives derived from the analysis of given strategic objectives and utilized all capabilities of the available military assets. Likewise,

⁶ Daniel J. Hughes, Moltke On the Art of War (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 22

⁷ Herms, 328-329

today's NATO planners utilize the operational objective of a campaign as the focal point of all military efforts throughout the process of campaign planning and execution. This approach enables military planners to look at campaigns as a sequence of actions at the tactical level. Much like Moltke's era, the decisive victory must be accomplished at the tactical level while the operational level defines the criteria for success.

Field Marshall Helmuth Graf von Moltke's approach to modern campaign planning continues to possess relevance. Moltke established a structural approach to campaign planning, which essentially is still valid for NATO and thereby defined the operational level of warfare. In principle, Moltke asked the same questions that are still the starting points of today's campaign planning. The main NATO document asks: "Which military conditions must be attained to achieve strategic and operations objectives? What sequence of actions is most likely to produce these conditions? How should military resources be applied to best accomplish that sequence of actions? Are the associated risks acceptable?"⁹ Moltke proceeded on a life-long learning process based upon these questions.

Moltke's structural approach for campaign planning encompassed four conceptual "cornerstones." Every military campaign has to achieve a defined operational goal, which is harmonized with the political goal of warfare. Existing contingencies have to be thoroughly analysed in advance in order to achieve a favourable positioning for the own forces; the most likely courses of action for enemy troops have to be defined first. Every detail has to be considered during the preparation-phase of a campaign; during the conduct of a campaign, flexibility is essential in order to adapt to enemy actions and the result of major battles. Superior

⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 87

⁹ *NATO Campaign Planning* NATO UNCLASSIFIED (Releasable to P/P/WEU), Chapter 3 – Operations Planning Principles, 3-1

operational speed throughout the campaign ensures room to manoeuvre and enables the concentration of one's own forces at decisive points.

Field Marshall Helmuth Graf von Moltke evaluated his structural approach for campaign planning by empirical studies and experiences derived from several campaigns. The sequence of campaigns illustrates Moltke's evolving approach of campaign analysis. Moltke's historical writings were his perceptions of actual events and reflect his own views. The Russian campaign against Turkey in 1828/29 and the German-Danish Wars 1848/49 and 1864 significantly influenced Moltke's initial analysis and consequently influenced the development of a planning focus for military campaigns. The Prussian campaign against Austria refined the evolving structural approach of Moltke. The Franco-Prussian campaign displayed Moltke's mature approach to campaign planning, which is already quite similar to the NATO approach for campaign planning.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PLANNING FOCUS FOR MILITARY CAMPAIGNS

Moltke looked upon war as an existential trial of strength. Defeat of the enemy was the main strategic goal and destruction of the enemy's armed forces the corresponding operational aim. In Moltke's opinion, policy should only influence the beginning and the end of war, while the conduct of a campaign has to be solely dominated by military considerations: "Politics uses war for its own purposes and hereby decides upon the beginning and ending of warfare..."

Moltke suggested that war is a logical entity on its own, which should not be affected by political influences. He got even more specific upon this subject when he postulated "[p]olitics should

not get involved in military operations.”¹⁰ Thus, Moltke neglected the essence of General von Clausewitz’s dictum.

In order to make sure that an accomplished military success is politically useful, military strategy has to aim at a defined operational goal, which is harmonized with the political intention of warfare. By setting a challenging operational goal, Moltke was able to establish a planning focus for his military campaigns and to optimize the efficiency of the available military means. Even though Soviet military theorists established the term “Operational Art” within the twentieth century, Moltke already understood the very essence of the operational level of warfare, namely to “concentrate on attaining strategic objectives.”¹¹

Modern campaigns focus on a differentiated approach towards the use of military force. In almost all contemporary campaigns, military means are used in close context with other governmental efforts like economic and diplomatic measures. Consequently, the operational goals of military campaigns have to be rather sophisticated and less extreme than Moltke’s approach. Moltke’s favourite words in connection with a campaign seem to have been “defeat” and “destruction.” Therefore, he could not allow politics to interfere with military affairs. From the beginning of mobilization until achievement of the operational goal, only military factors were considered to be relevant. This approach is absolutely not in line with the conduct of modern campaigns, which aim to be useful in the context of on-going political efforts at all levels. Moltke achieved an important evolution in the conduct of war, but his political point of view was still based upon the Napoleonic age. He simply ignored the evolution of society while he focused on improving the efficiency of military campaigns. This attitude had a devastating impact upon the further course of history.

¹⁰ F. von Schmerfeld, Generalfeldmarschall Graf von Moltke - Ausgewählte Werke, Vol. I (Berlin: Verlag von Reimar Hobbing, 1925), 30 (translation by the author)

The following analysis outlines Moltke's approach to establish the operational planning focus for military campaigns. His accomplishments derived from the thorough examination of past campaigns. The extracted data enabled Moltke to recognize decisive empirical factors and to define forms of thought and behaviour, which were most likely to achieve military victory. Finally Moltke transformed his realizations into criteria for operational success and thereby characterized the operational planning focus.

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efficiency allows the concentration of one's own troops before major battles and thereby decisively influences force relationships at the military centres of gravity.

The realization of the human inability to determine an unchangeable true course of action within the complexity of warfare leads Moltke to the conclusion that “[w]ar-like any art-can not be learned by the use of rationalistic methods, but only by the use of empirical methods. In war like in art there is no common norm, talent can not be substituted by rules.”¹⁴ Consequently, Moltke denied the usefulness of universally applicable doctrines. He stated that doctrines must become useless platitudes in order to be of common validity. Moltke always stayed specific in his perceptions and aimed to improve his approach towards campaign planning by a thorough “lessons learned” analysis of past campaigns.

Military strategy, which Moltke described as a system of exemptions, is required to provide the tactical level with the necessary means to fight a battle and to analyze the outcome of the battle in order to define the further course of military action. In order to achieve a favourable positioning for one's own forces, the most likely and the most dangerous courses of action for enemy troops have to be defined first. Moltke stated: “The strategic object governs the premeditated decision (Entschluss) to engage in a battle. A resulting accidental encounter, which happens often, is purely an act of tactics. Strategy governs the movements of the army for the planned battle; the manner of execution is the province of tactics.”¹⁵

Moltke's first published approach to analyse warfare in the sequential context of a military campaign is based upon the Russian campaign against Turkey during 1828/29, which encompasses the campaigns of the Danube, the sieges of Brailow, Varna, Silistria, Shumla and

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78

¹⁴ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 242 (translation by the author)

¹⁵ Hughes, 125

the passage of the Balkans.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that this campaign is like a reverse printing for Moltke's approach of campaign planning.

The negative pattern started before the military campaign had even begun. Turkey's decision to go to war was not followed by immediate and resolute military action from any side. Turkey actually had declared war against Russia at the end of 1827, but did not execute any military campaign. Russia declared war rather reluctantly in April 1828. Russia emphasized the fact that she had to go to war in order to ensure the adherence of existing contracts. The reaction of the European cabinets cautiously monitoring the Russian expansion of power had to be considered by Russian diplomacy.

The delicate diplomatic relationship towards Europe may have been the reason why the Russians kept the main body of their armed forces at their western border.¹⁷ Consequently, the Russians performed a delayed, insufficiently prepared, and militarily weak strategic offensive against Turkey. The Turks themselves remained static and showed no military initiative. In fact "[t]he whole strategy of the Turks...consisted in passive resistance."¹⁸ The Turkish military passivity was only interrupted by occasional offensive operations. Consequently, destruction of a single Russian division was the main military achievement of the Turkish troops during the military campaign in 1828, despite the Turkish quantitative military superiority. Russia, on the other side, had prepared the campaign for many years and still proved to be insufficiently

¹⁶ Baron Helmuth von Moltke, The Russians in Bulgaria and Rumelia in 1828 and 1829 (London: John Murray, 1854) This source seems to contain reliable information even though the translator states in his preface that Baron von Moltke already died (Moltke actually died in 1891) and that Moltke served with the Turkish army by order of his sovereign through the campaigns 1828 and 1829 (Moltke served in the topographical division of the Great General Staff from 1828 till 1831; he was ordered to Turkey from 1836 till 1839 in order to instruct and organize the troops of the Sultan).

¹⁷ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 31

¹⁸ Moltke, The Russians in Bulgaria and Rumelia in 1828 and 1829, 256

organized and equipped in many aspects.¹⁹ Moltke stated rather sarcastically: “The Russians reckoned upon the moral superiority of their own troops and the inefficiency of the Turkish commanders.”²⁰

Until May 1828, the Russian troops focused on limited operations within the Danubian Principalities where no enemy action was expected. Delayed out of political reasons, the real military campaign started with the crossing of the Danube at Satunovo on 8 June 1828. Moltke specified Constantinople as the Turkish centre of gravity for the Russian campaign, and he, therefore, criticized the delayed start of the operation. The distance between the Lower Danube and Constantinople was now too large to be crossed by the Russian troops until winter.

The delayed start of the campaign was not the only problem. To aggravate the situation, the Russian military contingent was also much too small to achieve a substantial military success at the operational level. Moltke states that Russia apparently had not considered the impact of geography upon the campaign. The forests of the Balkans are unsuitable for battles in the open field and therefore, the Russians could hardly make use of their tactical superiority until they had passed the Balkans. Additionally, the necessary Russian military reinforcement was mobilized so late that it arrived when the campaign was ended. Moltke, who was a perfectionist, likely disliked this careless campaign planning. His condescending description of the bad Russian example implies that he intended to emphasize the necessity of thorough campaign planning.

The available Russian troops in the field were diminished even further by the occupation of the Principalities of Wallachia, which Moltke considered to be a suitable task for the

¹⁹ The main reason for the conflict originated from the peace contract of Bukarest in 1812. This contract established Russia as protector of the faith for all citizens of the Turkish Empire with Greek confession. This responsibility was in line with Russia’s strategic interests in that region. Turkey never accepted the particular clause within the contract.

²⁰ Moltke, The Russians in Bulgaria and Rumelia in 1828 and 1829, 252

subsequent corps. The militarily unsuitable Russian approach absorbed around 20,000 men, one third of the Russian contingent, and further increased the risk for the campaign. Moltke preferred an approach by sea or from Bessarabia for the Russian campaign. He explicitly criticized the inefficient Russian approach because it decreased the Russian contingent and delayed the necessary progress of the campaign. Obviously, Moltke had already a good understanding of what he would call later “operational speed.” The Russian misperception in this aspect caused an immediate problem for their further progress. During the occupation of Brailow, the reduced Russian contingent faced strong Turkish military resistance. This unexpected difficulty caused a further delay, which had a major impact upon the whole campaign.

The fact that Brailow did not fall as soon as expected delayed further operations by five weeks. Ten weeks after the campaign had started the Russian troops had penetrated merely 20 miles into the Turkish side of the Balkans. When the Russians finally took Brailow and approached Shumla, the Russian troops arrived much too late and were not strong enough to crush the Turkish resistance. The Russians decided to take position in front of Shumla, lacked all further initiative, and “fought the Turks exactly where they most excelled, behind walls and entrenchments.”²¹ Moltke assumed that the situation would have been totally different if the Russian troops had arrived six weeks earlier. The Turks were still unprepared then and Shumla “almost destitute of defenders,…”²² Now the approach towards Shumla had turned into a strategic mistake for the Russians, which necessarily affected the military success of the whole campaign. Again, Moltke’s analysis outlines the importance of operational speed and accurate timing for military success.

²¹ Moltke, The Russians in Bulgaria and Rumelia in 1828 and 1829, 250-251

²² Ibid, 250

The Russians decided to take a covering position in front of the Turks without having a substantial cover either by walls or geography. Consequently, 40,000 well-equipped and sustained Turkish soldiers sheltered by the walls of the centrally located garrison faced 20,000 Russian soldiers stretched out in a thin cordon before Shumla. The Russian had no reserves left and consequently a Turkish attack at any point of the Russian lines would have been successful. To make the bad situation even worse, the Russians were without light cavalry while the Turkish troops contained a reasonable amount of horsemen. This deficiency was obviously caused by a major misperception during the Russian campaign planning. A thorough analysis would have prevented this failure. Additionally, the Russians did not have a single point within 100 miles to where their sick and wounded could be transported in order to get medical treatment. The Russian commander, Earl Wittgenstein, must have been well aware of all these deficiencies, but the bad campaign planning left him no other choice than to continue and to try his best to achieve some success at the tactical level.

The Russians knew that they had to take all three Turkish garrisons at Shumla, Silistria, and Varna in order to cross the Kamtchik, which was essential for the further operational progress. Moltke outlines that this task was definitely too challenging for the weak Russian troops. A thorough analysis of the available military capabilities would have highlighted the Russian military deficiencies, but the Russian commander obviously ignored the inadequate force ratio. When the Turkish commander finally attacked the Russians in order to ensure the further supply of the Turkish troops, he destroyed a complete Russian division. Consequently, the Russians were forced to stop the siege of Shumla and to reorganize their troops in a defensive position, but instead of launching the decisive attack, the Turks withdrew back into the garrison after the necessary passage for supplies was cleared.

While the Russians tried to focus on Shumla, they obviously did not properly consider their operational or their tactical situation. Any action from the Russians or the Turks was accidental and not an intentional part of a prepared campaign plan. As outlined before, the Russian commander must have known about his operational deficiencies and tried to focus on some tactical success at Shumla. He should have come to the conclusion that actually Varna was the necessary stronghold, which had to be taken first in order to ensure winter-quarters and thereby prosecution of next year's campaign. When the Russians finally stopped the unsuccessful siege of Shumla and attacked Varna, they had again lost valuable time. Moltke described this process of military misperception in all details and obviously with professional indignation. He always outlined that every military decision has to consider the overarching context of the campaign.

the Turkish troops. This action was really the decisive battle of the campaign and a tactical masterpiece by the Russians. Moltke was impressed by this Russian success, which turned an agonizing campaign into a major victory. The idea of the decisive battle and the importance of victory at the tactical level later became an essential part of Moltke's campaign planning

After the battle of Kulewtscha, the passage of the Balkans was finally free and the campaign gained operational speed. The Russians approached Adrianople and took the city without any serious military resistance. Any further substantial advance of the Russian troops towards Constantinople would have destroyed the deception of the Russian military strength. Additionally, England was alarmed by the Russian military success and threatened to intervene in the conflict.²³ Consequently, the Russian troops stayed in Adrianople and demonstrated military power. The Sultan finally had to accept the conditions of a peace treaty offered by the Russians and the war officially ended on 14 September 1829.

Moltke's analysis of the events during the Russian campaign 1828/29 already emphasized the necessity to keep political influences out of the conduct of a military campaign. In his opinion, most problems during this campaign directly or indirectly derived from political influences during the preparation and conduct of the campaign. His opinion was reconfirmed during the Prusso-Danish war in 1864.

The German-Danish war was Moltke's first challenge as chief of the Prussian General Staff and he was well prepared to face this undertaking. It is most probable that Moltke had focused on the campaign against Denmark at least since 1862. In that year, Moltke started a thorough analysis of the Prussian Campaign against Denmark in 1848/49.²⁴ His conclusion from this rather limited campaign was the necessity to ensure that a military campaign can proceed

²³ Ernst Engelberg, Bismarck: Das Reich in der Mitte Europas (Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 1990), 242

²⁴ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 34

without political interference. Internal conflicts originating from a major controversy between monarchy and middle class and the diplomatic influence of European cabinets had increasingly paralysed Prussia's ability to act militarily during this first campaign against Denmark.

The second campaign against Denmark in 1864 was politically and militarily much more profound. The war was based upon the mutual agreement of Austria and Prussia to restore the duchy of Schleswig.²⁵ Neither Prussia nor Austria intended to conquer Danish territory. During the conduct of the campaign, the military plans had to be adapted due to the fact that the Danish troops escaped the flanking movements of the Prussian and Austrian troops by offshore withdrawal. The retreat of the Danish army to Dueppel, Alssen, and Jutland created the operational necessity for the coalition troops to occupy Jutland. In February 1864, Field Marshall Freiherr von Wrangel asked for political permission to enter Jutland within the next three days. This request was not in line with the harmonized policy approach of the Prussian-Austrian Coalition and permission was not instantly granted. Further negotiations were initiated in order to achieve a diplomatic agreement between Prussia and Austria.

Moltke intervened and emphasized the necessity to occupy Jutland, in order to destroy the main body of the Danish army, accompanied by a landing operation at Fuenen. Meanwhile, the Austrians had assessed the development of the conflict in a broader political context and disagreed to the request because of the imminent danger to start a European war. As a result, they did not approve the use of Austrian ships to ferry the German troops. The Prussians stuck to their operational approach and started to prepare for the necessary landing operation at Fuenen by their own means. The cease-fire and the following peace treaty with Denmark in October 1864 did not allow the Prussian troops to execute these operations. Moltke was obviously

²⁵ The Prusso-Austrian coalition under Prussian military leadership was looked upon as a masterpiece of diplomacy by Prussia. The Prussian intention was to separate Austria from her Southern German allies.

disappointed that policy had prevented the Prussian troops from achieving the operational objective, which undoubtedly was the destruction of the Danish army as the operational centre of gravity.²⁶

Moltke did not hesitate to use political arguments to justify military ambitious objectives. He argued that politics is paramount to alter the requirements for peace and therefore, “(military) strategy can only aim at the highest possible goal which is achievable with the given (military) assets.”²⁷ Consequently, the operational goal of a campaign has to be determined by the available military capabilities. It is exactly at this point when Moltke created a major inconsistency with his own structural approach, namely to establish an operational goal in order to achieve given political objectives.

The Russian campaign against Turkey and the German campaign against Denmark obviously failed to fulfil Moltke’s requirements for successful campaign planning. The Russians were not well prepared for the campaign against Turkey and totally relied upon their tactical superiority in the field. Consequently, Russia nearly deteriorated her strategic objective. The Turks were merely a shadow of their potential capabilities and showed no structural approach for a military campaign at all. During the German campaign against Denmark, the Austrians hesitated to achieve fully the operational goal and subordinated it to political considerations. Consequently, the campaign became paralysed when it was supposed to be dynamic.

Moltke’s analysis of the Russian campaign outlines a permanent tension between political goals and tactical necessities. Political constraints delayed and hampered the campaign. Additionally, the campaign planning was superficial and inadequate. Consequently, the Russian

²⁶ Colonel Michael D. Krause, Moltke and the Origins of Operational Art (extract from *Military Review* Vol. LXX, No. 9, September 1990), 31

²⁷ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 30 (translation by the author)

military contingent was insufficiently prepared and too weak to guarantee success without major operational and tactical mistakes by the Turks. The operational speed of the Russian troops was too slow and the successful conclusion of the campaign more than once endangered.

Furthermore, tactical thinking of Russian military commanders often neglected the operational context of the campaign and focused on short-term goals.

In spite of all these odds, the non-interference of politics during the conduct of the campaign in 1829 and the victorious battle of Kulewtscha enabled strategic success, which was finally achieved. Two relevant factors of Moltke's operational considerations are already reflected in parts of this campaign: the non-interference of politics during warfare and the decisive battle in a sequence of military events.

The Prusso-Danish war showed a misbalance between the political goal to restore the duchy of Schleswig and the operational goal to defeat the Danish army.²⁸ As soon as the Danish army withdrew to Dueppel, Alssen and Jutland, the coalition disagreed upon the operational goal. Policy interfered in the war and the military could not accomplish its mission. At this point, Moltke showed inconsistency with his own approach, to let politics decide upon the beginning and the end of the warfare. The military ineffectiveness of Prussia during the campaigns against Denmark in 1848/49 and 1864 obviously had a major impact upon Moltke's political views and emphasized his not particularly well-balanced approach towards politics and

²⁸ Colonel Michael D. Krause states in his article "Moltke and the Origins of Operational Art" (Military Review, Vol. LXX, No. 9, September 1990), 31 that the war's objective was the defeat of Denmark: "His (Moltke's) approach to the situation focused on the war's objective (Kriegsobjekt)-the defeat of Denmark-and the operational objective, destruction of the Danish army." This opinion is not in line with the description of the German-Danish war based upon Moltke's letters and documents of the Prussian General Staff. The restoration of the duchy of Schleswig constituted the political consensus within the German-Austrian coalition and was the war's objective. The defeat of Denmark most probably could have caused a European war, or at least the involvement of England into the war. "The agreement between Austria and Prussia did not go further than the restoration of the duchy of Schleswig, neither Prussia nor Austria intended to occupy Danish territory. The explicit goal was to urge the Danish government to guarantee the documented rights of Schleswig." Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 45 (translation by the author)

warfare.²⁹ Moltke did not want politics to influence warfare or to alter the requirements for peace; nevertheless, he was able to see the impact of military achievements in the overarching political context. He can be called a “grammarian of war” who definitely did not like external spellcheckers.³⁰

The Prussian campaign against Austria in 1866 showed already a clear picture of Moltke’s strategic vision and could be described as a seven weeks miniature of the upcoming campaign against France in 1870/71. The political and operational objectives were harmonized; the campaign was thoroughly prepared; and the successful execution culminated in a decisive battle at Koeniggraetz. The structure of this campaign further refined Moltke’s approach upon campaign planning. The operational objective was in line with the political goal and from an operational perspective the campaign proceeded in a well-prepared flow of events, which culminated in the decisive battle of Koeniggraetz.

THE AUSTRO-PRUSSIAN WAR 1866

Moltke stated already in a memoir from 1860 “[a] war between Austria and Prussia would affect all the Powers of Europe.” His special concern in this context was the national interest of France, which “least of all can wish, as the outcome of this conflict, for an Empire of the German nation, comprising 70,000,000 inhabitants...” At the same time, Moltke also considered factors, which might constitute a French interest within a potential conflict between

²⁹ Moltke revised his analysis of the Prussian campaign against Denmark 1848/49 several times and did not finish it until 1877.

³⁰ Arden Buchholz, Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning (Oxford: Berg, 1991), 54

Prussia and Austria. He stated that France “may hope for the greatest advantages – the acquisition of Belgium, of the Rhenish Province, and perhaps of Holland.”³¹

In his analysis, Moltke outlined the substantial political risks of a Prussian campaign against Austria. Given the fact that a conflict between Prussia and France was imminent in the mid-term perspective, the loss of the Rhenish Province and French occupation of Belgium and the Netherlands would have been a substantial strategic drawback for Prussia. A long lasting war with a decisive defeat of Austria would have inevitably caused the loss of Prussian provinces in the west and probably also in the east. At the same time, the desired victory over Austria was an essential military condition for the unification of Germany under Prussian control. For the other German states, the situation was quite uncomfortable because up to now their political influence was based upon the tensions between Prussia and Austria. In this up-coming conflict, neutrality was not possible for most of them and geography had to be the decisive factor as to which side they would join. A main player on the Austrian side would certainly be Saxony, which could contribute an army of about 25,000 soldiers.

The political objective of the war was the defeat of Austria and consequently the exclusion of Austria from German affairs.³² The corresponding operational goal was the destruction of the Austrian army. Due to the delicate political context of the Austro-Prussian war, Moltke emphasized the necessity for a short and successful Prussian campaign and underlined Moltke’s statement that “[e]ven the first deployment (Aufmarsch) of the army-can not be planned without a previous plan of operations,...The first deployment of the army is

³¹ Thomas E. Griess and Jay Luvaas, Strategy: Its Theory and Application: The Wars for German Unification, 1866-1871, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1971), 4-5

³² Krause, “Moltke and the Origins of Operational Art” (Military Review, Vol. LXX, No. 9, September 1990), 31

inseparably connected with the operations themselves.”³³ Thorough analysis of probable courses of action and an increased operational speed proved to be a crucial necessity for this campaign.

Moltke started his operational planning by sketching out four basic assumptions:

1. Austria, even during a war against Prussia, could not totally neglect the defences of her eastern borders. Otherwise, Russia could have used her troops in Poland, Volhynia and Bessarabia in order to threaten Hungary and Slovenia.
2. Another part of the Austria army was occupied in Italy, mainly to defend Venice against the Lombardy.
3. Prussia could not risk withdrawing two army corps from the Rhine Province. These army corps would have been very useful in order to protect the Marks and Silesia. Instead, they were needed to operate upon the Rhine in close coordination with Belgian and Netherlands troops and probably an English expedition corps.
4. The 10th Federal Corps was engaged to observe Denmark and if necessary, to support the two Prussian army corps within the Rhine Province.³⁴

Moltke considered in his memoir that the Prussian campaign had to be mainly conducted by seven army corps located within the eastern provinces supported by possible allies, while the Austrians could rely upon five corps (including one cavalry corps from Hungary), forty three battalions of frontier troops, the army reserve of artillery and the Saxon Army at Dresden.

Since 1860, Moltke developed possible courses of action based upon different scenarios. The most intense campaigns would have been direct attacks against each other’s respective capitals. While Vienna was 140 miles away from the Silesian border, Berlin was just 94 miles from the southern frontier of the Austrian empire. Furthermore, no geographical obstacles or

³³ Hughes, 91

³⁴ Griess and Luvaas, 7-8

fortresses could have been used by Prussian troops to defend Berlin. The whole theatre of war in this scenario had a total depth of only 187 miles between the initial invasion point of Austrian troops and the Baltic Sea. Based upon this analysis Moltke rejected the idea of an offensive campaign by Prussia. A limited war, deriving from the Austrian intention to regain Silesia became the most probable political scenario for Moltke's further planning. Nevertheless, he considered the fact that this war easily could change its character and become a decisive war, targeting at the capitals.

Moltke analysed the Austrian options and predicted an assembly of Austrian troops in Bohemia as most probable. The frontier-line had a length of approximately 470 miles and Austria had the better front of defence passes on her side of the Giant Mountains and the Erzgebirge. Moltke came to the conclusion that “[f]rom Bohemia, Austria threatens alike Silesia and the Marks.”³⁵ Prussia would not know until the last moment which direction the main body of the Austrian troops would take. For Austria, a direct attack against Silesia was as possible as an operation against the Marks, accompanied by a minor attack against Silesia. Furthermore, the Giant Mountains and the mountains of Lusatia would cover the Austrian troops during this initial phase of the campaign.

The further advance of the Austrian troops would be supported by geography and the direction of railways. As well, the important Austrian ally Saxony would profit from an initial assembly of Austrian troops in Bohemia because Saxony's army could get support and protection in case of a necessary retreat from the approaching Prussian troops. Moltke came to the final conclusion that “[i]t can, therefore, scarcely be doubtful that the first assembly of the

³⁵ Colonel Thomas E. Griess and Professor Jay Luvaas, Strategy: Its Theory and Application: The Wars for German Unification, 1866-1871 (Westport, Connecticut U.S.A., Greenwood Press, 1971 (reprint)), 12

Austrian Army destined to act against Prussia will take place upon and in front of the line Prague-Pardubitz.”³⁶

The further course of action for the Austrian troops would certainly be influenced by the Prussian capability to facilitate fortresses and geography. The main focus of the operation would most probably aim at the Marks because a direct attack against Silesia would make it rather difficult for the Austrian troops to defend their position. A substantial advance of Austrian troops on the left bank of the Elbe in this context was unlikely. A line of Prussian fortresses, Torgau-Wittenberg-Magdeburg, in interaction with the Prussian troops in the field would have made a rapid progress of Austrian troops rather difficult. Austrian troops would, therefore, more likely take control of the Elbe, but the main approach would target at the right bank and lead into the Lusatian mountains. By this approach, the Austrian army would remain in a close connection with Saxony’s army advancing through Trautenau against Breslau. Seven good roads in the area between Teplitz and Reichenberg would support the Austrian progress through the mountains. Trains could be used to reach Teplitz and Reichenberg. In this most favourable scenario for Austria three days after the declaration of war, there may have been several columns of approaching Austrian troops against the Prussian army: three to four at Dresden, three at Bischofswerda, one at Goerlitz and five at Bautzen. This positioning of troops would have enabled the Austrians to adjust their military emphasis according to the Prussian efforts to defend at the Elbe or the upper Spree. One additional march would have enabled the Austrian troops to unite between Elbe and Spree. Even though there were only two usable railway lines towards the Marks, the geography and the available roads would have eased a further military approach for Austria. In this situation, Austria could have decided to enlarge the operational goal, take Berlin, and push the Prussian troops towards Stettin. Moltke considered

³⁶ Ibid., 13

this scenario as the most dangerous enemy course of action within the determined political context.

Moltke also analysed the impact of a direct Austrian major attack against Silesia. He assumed that in this case, the Prussian main force had to approach the enemy through Goerlitz. Meanwhile, weaker Prussian troops could have kept the Austrian troops engaged. Obviously, this option was not the most favourable from the Austrian point of view.

Moltke's final conclusion from the analysis of these most probable courses of action for an approaching Austrian army was the fact that a defensive campaign-approach for the Prussian troops was an unsuitable option given the numeric superiority of Austrian troops and the favourable geography for an Austrian attack. Any retrieval of Prussian troops from a defending position at the Elbe would end up at Berlin. A Prussian attack from the Elbe, on the other hand, would significantly disturb the enemy's operational planning and enable Prussian troops, if necessary, to withdraw again back to the Elbe. Consequently, an offensive campaign was the most favourable own course of action.

In 1866, the grand strategic picture was exactly the way Moltke had considered it back in 1860. The war with Austria could start without initial involvement of any major European cabinet. Saxony had joined the Austrian side and additionally Bavaria had become an Austrian ally. In May 1866, Moltke regarded the Austrian arming to be so far advanced to the Prussian efforts that he urged the Prussian King to sign the orders for an immediate mobilization.³⁷ Given the fact that the king still hesitated to initiate this first act of war, Moltke had again overstressed his own dictum about the relationship between politics and war.

Moltke's detailed calculations proved to be right. Prussia's thoroughly prepared mobilization proceeded swiftly and according to the defined timetables. This exact timing was

of highest importance because Moltke's calculation showed an advantageous relationship of available Prussian troops towards the Austrian forces between day 18 and day 42 of the ordered Prussian mobilization.³⁸

Unfortunately for Moltke's plans, several European cabinets under the leadership of France started diplomatic efforts to prevent the war. Thus, Prussia was restrained from making use of her advantageous military situation. This situation caused tremendous tensions within the Prussian cabinet. On the one side, the diplomatic approaches from France could not be rejected without the severe risk to cause a European war. On the other side, every day of diplomatic negotiations decreased Prussia's chances in the war against Austria. Finally, the Prussian King decided Prussia should participate at diplomatic negotiations, but the military efforts should go on unrestricted. Moltke considered this decision to be a victory of military strategy over politics. He certainly felt supported in his dictum about the non-interference of politics into military affairs. The king's decision was absolutely in line with Moltke's search for military perfection.

From the military point of view, Prussia had to cope with three groups of enemy forces, namely Hannover and Hesse, the Southern German coalition, and Austria. Hannover and Hesse had not finally decided to approach militarily Prussian troops, and Moltke considered that they easily could be disarmed without any real military pressure. The Southern German coalition had no united command and was not prepared for a combined campaign. They lacked any combined planning or organisation at the operational level, which would have enabled them to accomplish substantial military success against Prussia in the context of an overarching campaign plan. Moltke used this realization for the French campaign. For the war against France, he achieved

³⁷ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 35

³⁸ Krause, "Moltke and the Origins of Operational Art" (Military Review, Vol. LXX, No. 9, September 1990), 32

the subordination of all German armies under the command of the Prussian King, which enabled Moltke to engage all troops in the implementation of his campaign planning. In the context of the Austro-Prussian war, Austria, supported by Saxony, constituted without any doubt the military centre of gravity. Once the Austrian army was defeated, all further resistance from the Southern German coalition would collapse.

Moltke knew that he had to confront the Austrian army with a strong Prussian contingent in order to achieve an advantageous force relationship. In preparation of the war against Austria, he had failed to convince the Prussian King to form a coalition with Italy, in order to bind as many Austrian troops as possible in the defence of Venice.³⁹ Consequently, Moltke had changed his previous assumptions towards the necessary first assembly of Prussian troops and he now recommended to join the seven Prussian corps from the eastern provinces and the two army corps from the Rhine Province in order to attack the main body of the Austrian troops. By doing so, Moltke ensured a substantial concentration of military forces towards the operational centre of gravity. In order to substitute for the lack of military power in the Rhine Province, Moltke had prepared a new corps, which mainly consisted of soldiers from fortresses grouped around the organisational structure of the 13th Infantry Division.

The offensive campaign against Austria was based upon the concept of three armies (Elbe Army, First Army, Second Army) attacking the main Austrian forces separately, but in a harmonized operational context. The quick allocation of these three army corps was conducted by using the railway system. The Prussian troops were transported to defined railroad points, which enabled the Prussian troops to march towards the designated assembly areas of the three

³⁹ King Wilhelm, as advised by his chancellor Bismarck, wanted to keep the upcoming war within inner-German borders. Any further involvement of other European nations would have increased the danger of a European war.

armies. If required, uniting all these troops in one assembly area could also have created a strong defensive position.

After reaching its assembly area, the First Army marched further towards Goerlitz and together with the Elbe Army urged the Saxony's army to withdraw towards Bohemia. The Elbe Army took control of Dresden and thereby, ensured substantial resources for the Prussian troops. For the further course of action, the Elbe Army was subordinated to the commander of the Prussian First Army and joined its efforts. Moltke aimed at unity of command wherever possible.

Moltke considered a significant concentration of Austrian forces in northern Bohemia in order to approach Silesia, but he was not informed about the actual situation of the Austrian troops. Consequently, the First Army approached the Austrian army from the North and the Second Army marched towards Bohemia from the East. Moltke decided to keep the Second Army as long as possible in a position that enabled it to stop an Austrian attack at the Neisse or to attack immediately the Austrian forces while they depart. Only after the Austrians showed no intention to march towards Upper Silesia, Moltke ordered the First and Second Army to march into Bohemia and to unite in the direction of Gitschin.

The Austrian commander had mainly focused on the First Army and was now confronted with the flanking movement of a Second Army comprising more than 100,000 soldiers. His approach to secure the Austrian flanks decreased his forces by four corps eliminated by the Prussians. On 30 June 1866, the Austrian main forces had tried to concentrate in-between the two approaching Prussian armies. Due to the high operational speed of the Prussian troops, this favourable position turned out to be useless for the Austrians because the distance between the First and Second Army was already too close to attack separately. On 1 July, the Austrian

troops took defensive positions near Koeniggraetz. Two days later, the decisive battle of Koeniggraetz took place.

As the two Prussian armies approached the Austrian troops, the VIII Army Corps augmented them. Thus, Moltke succeeded in approaching the Austrian troops with a numerical superiority of 30,000 soldiers. Moltke was very upset in this context because initially this corps had been ordered to stay at the Rhine and he was not informed about this decision.⁴⁰

The Austrian troops were in a difficult position. There were only two bridges over the Elbe available for the Austrian troops and a further retreat behind the river in time proved to be impossible. As a result, the Austrian commander lost his ability to undertake operational manoeuvres. Six army corps and four cavalry divisions had to be positioned for an intensive battle in a relatively small area. At the beginning of the battle of Koeniggraetz, the Prussian troops arrived with a numerical superiority and with the ability to conduct flanking and turning movements, while the Austrian troops could only react at the tactical level.

Moltke convinced the Prussian King to make use of this favourable position and the First Army was ordered to attack directly while the Second Army had to attack the flanks and rear of the Austrian troops. From 27 June onwards, the First Army marched in front of the Second Army and was assigned to attack first. Moltke's orders concerning the battle, signed by the Prussian King, comprised clear orders to subordinate commanders. At the same time, he did not limit the freedom of the subordinate commanders to act independently in order to achieve the given tasks.

On 3 July at 8:00, the Prussian King ordered the Prussian troops to attack. At 10:00, the Elbe Army, which had been joined with the First Army, received the command to attack the left flank of the Austrians and to prevent a withdrawal towards Pardubitz.

At about 11:00, the battle approached an end. The Austrians heavily defended themselves with artillery and the further advance of the Prussian troops depended upon the arrival of the Second Army at the right flank of the Austrian forces. In this situation, some subordinate commanders from the First Army decided to withdraw partially again. While the embarrassed Prussian King tried to stop these manoeuvres, other subordinate commanders decided to send the two reserve divisions on the battlefield. Moltke considered this decision to be a major mistake. While these divisions did not make any real difference at the battlefield now, they had the important task to follow the Austrian troops after their defeat. It was important to maintain fresh and completely organized troops for this mission. After the battle, it took the victorious Prussian troops two days before they could follow the retreating Austrian troops. Precious time was wasted by this delay and the operational speed decreased. In Moltke's opinion, the highest Prussian army command was ultimately responsible for this poor engagement of troops.

At 13:30, the Second Army arrived at the battlefield and successfully attacked the right flank of the Austrian troops. At 15:00, the Austrians started to withdraw and at 15:30, the Prussian King ordered an overarching decisive attack. At the end of the day, the Prussian victory was complete. The whole campaign would last seven weeks, but 3 July marked the decisive battle and predetermined the Prussian victory over Austria.

Moltke considered that the Austrian army was still capable of starting a limited military offensive and that it was necessary to monitor and, if necessary, to engage them in a battle. Austria knew it was now fighting for survival, and the Austrian forces started to concentrate in front of Vienna. Moreover, the defeated Austrian Army marched towards Vienna to join with Austrian troops from Italy.

⁴⁰ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 252

The First Army prepared now to attack the approaching Austrian Army from Olmuetz and to prevent its further approach towards Vienna or Pressburg, while the Elbe Army protected the First Army against an attack from Vienna. The Second Army secured the rear area near the fortress of Olmuetz. The highest Prussian commanders still expected a major battle, but on 22 July, a cease-fire could be achieved.

Negotiations for a peace treaty started 23 July in Nikolsburg, based upon French proposals for peace. The draft included the assurance of Austria's and Saxony's integrity; Prussia's leadership in Northern Germany was internationally accepted, and the Southern German states formed their own alliance, which was linked to the Northern German one. The Prussian King signed the peace treaty on 26 July.

Moltke considered this end to be a decisive difference between his campaign and any campaign in Napoleonic war. The relatively easy capture of Vienna is something Napoleon would have undoubtedly completed.⁴¹ Now mid-term political considerations dominated the end of the war. Prussia signed the peace treaty to avoid a confrontation with France at an inopportune time.

The end of the Austro-Prussian war found a Moltke who agreed with politics, even though he looked upon politics as a major hindrance during the campaign. The tension between politics and military plans culminated in the person of the monarch. Moltke was very specific when it came to King Wilhelm and his decisions, but he never mentioned Bismarck, the chancellor of Prussia. For Moltke, war formed the basis of politics. From his perspective, peace negotiations without decisive military factors are just phoney attempts to influence the outcome of military campaigns. His approach towards the campaign itself was an analytical one. A

⁴¹ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 38

campaign is a complex problem, which has to be solved. It is not about taking bloody revenge or collecting capitals as trophies. In this context, it is easy to understand why Moltke did not like the interference of politics into the end of the campaign against Denmark, but was in line with the end of the campaign against Austria. The Danish army escaped the decisive battle, while the Austrian forces had been substantially defeated at Koeniggraetz and out-manoeuvred in front of Vienna. The operational capacity of the Austrian army was destroyed and any further action had only tactical relevance.

Moltke's thorough preparation of the campaign was a precondition for success at the operational level. In particular, the detailed mobilization plans and pre-planned courses of action had proved to be useful in this complex high quantity warfare. Only detailed planning ahead of the Austrian campaign ensured victory went to the Prussian troops. The temporary separation of armies to deny military options for the enemy and influence his further course of action was accompanied by a quick concentration of one's own forces approaching decisive battles.

During execution of the campaign, the unity of command and the most time-efficient way of commanding proved to be superior.⁴² The military contingents had to support each other in order to ensure success; an autonomous fight of divisions or army corps is inefficient.

But there were still lessons to be learned by the Prussians. Moltke was ready to act immediately. During the campaign, Moltke was annoyed by the decisions of several subordinate commanders, and he did not even spare out the highest army command. They did not understand his operational concept and instead focused on singular battles or even just phases within battles. They lacked operational vision and wasted scarce resources like troops and time. Moltke aimed at direct military command by the Prussian General Staff and less freedom

for the subordinate commanders. He stated that the hierarchical structure of military organizations had to be reflected by an adequate structure of thoughts. Only unpredicted situations at the tactical level urge initiatives from subordinate commanders.⁴³ After the campaign, Moltke drafted a thorough analysis about the achievements and failures of all Prussian troop contingents, which he handed to the Prussian King. Moltke aimed to judge the different behaviour of subordinate commanders (even the members of the royal family) and their contribution to the success.

The campaign against Austria had refined Moltke's empirical analysis and at the same time increased his influence on the Prussian King. The floor was set for Moltke's final masterpiece, the campaign against France.

THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR 1870/71

Moltke was considering a war against France ever since he became chief of the Prussian General Staff in 1857. He recognized that the high quantity of troops involved would certainly create a new quality of warfare. In this context, thorough analysis of possible courses of action, detailed preparation of the campaign, and increased operational speed was of special importance. Moltke calculated a window of opportunity for the Prussian military success and targeted at this time-frame with the help of detailed mobilization planning. He knew that only continuous exercises guarantee the straightforward conduct of mobilization at large-scale and established annual exercises to ensure that the mobilization would work in time.

Moltke defined the defeat of the French army as the operational goal of the campaign. The strategic goal had to be the surrender of Paris as the political centre of France. Moltke was

⁴² Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 167

⁴³ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 296

informed about the fact that the seizure of Elsass-Lothringen was the only specific Prussian claim for French territory in an upcoming peace settlement.⁴⁴

Moltke knew that this campaign would stress the Prussian capabilities to the ultimate limit and that the high quantities of troops involved would cause all kinds of problems. Moltke decided to approach the problem by simplification. His basic operational idea was to move into France heading towards Paris, to look for the main body of the enemy force, and then to defeat it. It required Moltke's perfectionism to turn this simple idea into a successful campaign plan.⁴⁵

Among the results of the 1866 campaign was the fact that Prussia was the leading state within Germany. Austria was no longer part of German alliances, and Prussia took over the direct leadership in northern Germany and the indirect one for the Southern German Alliance. Moltke made use of this fact and mobilized the northern German armies at a large scale in annual exercises. Also, the chiefs of the southern German general staffs were informed about these exercises and could prepare accordingly.⁴⁶

The annual large-scale exercises were accompanied by detailed preparation of transport requirements. The railway system that German troops had to use was a rather heterogeneous system of public and private lines and no central administration could be used to co-ordinate all requirements connected with the mobilization of troops. Consequently, Moltke assigned one of his general staff officers, Colonel von Brandenstein, as a responsible co-ordinator for all problems associated with transportation of troop contingents by railroad. Every unit received detailed information about the time and location for further transport by train. The Prussian General Staff was exactly informed about the transport capacities and the impact upon the

⁴⁴ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 104

⁴⁵ Ibid., 79

⁴⁶ Ibid., 94

operational plan.⁴⁷ Furthermore, the concentration areas for the arriving troops were logistically well-prepared.

Moltke ensured by thorough preparation of the mobilization phase that the initial assembly of troops was in line with his operational planning. His plan, to look for and attack the main body of enemy forces in France, required a fortunate relative strength of forces at the right time. The political landscape shaped the available operational area for the campaign. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Switzerland were neutral countries. Any approach to utilize them as manoeuvring areas by Prussia or France would bind a reasonable number of troops and could cause considerable political problems. Moltke's plan was to concentrate the entire Prussian army south of Mainz. This approach had a double advantage. It put the Prussian troops into the right position to approach Paris and it enabled them to launch a successful defence of the whole frontier in case of a French attack. The main problem seemed to be the fortress of Metz, which had to be conquered or bypassed while approaching Paris. The fortress substantially supported the strength of the French troops in the field.

In 1866, Moltke considered the initial force ratio to be 360,000 German soldiers against 250,000 French soldiers, which could have turned to 386,000 against 343,000 later on. Fortunately for Prussia, in July 1870, Moltke could adjust his calculations to a maximum initial force ratio of 400,000 German soldiers to 250,000 French soldiers.⁴⁸ The German troops were organized into three armies: the First Army with 60,000 soldiers with a dedicated assembly area south of Trier/Moselle, the Second Army with 131,000 soldiers plus 60,000 reserves with a

⁴⁷ Buchholz, 52

⁴⁸ This advantageous change was based upon the fact that all southern German states joined Prussia in the war against France. Every German politician knew in 1870 that at the end of this war the Prussian King could turn out to be the new German Kaiser. Not everyone was happy about this fact, but Bismarck's continuing diplomatic efforts, including his sophisticated chequebook policy, opened the way for the unification of Germany under Prussian leadership.

dedicated assembly area at Bad Homburg, and the Third Army with 100,000 soldiers centred at Landau. Three corps, with altogether 100,000 soldiers, stayed in northeast Germany to guard against a possible attack by Austria.

All troops were subordinated under the command of the Prussian King. Moltke, as the nominated chief of the allied army staff, was in total control of all available troops. This arrangement guaranteed the greatest possible harmony between the campaign planning and execution. Moltke decided to take 15 officers with him into the field against France. Thus, he created a small staff, which could continuously analyse the current situation and was independent from the formal structures in Berlin. The focus of this “sufficient staff” was on operations, intelligence, and transport in order to ensure fast decision-making in these important areas.

the idea of a sudden unexpected attack. The static Prussian troops would have been outflanked by the main body of the available French troops and thereby separated from the southern German allies. There were plans to cross the Rhine at the height of Strassbourg in order to achieve this separation. Additionally, northern Prussia was to be targeted by an expeditionary army landed by French ships in order to engage as many Prussian troops as possible. In this situation, the southern German allies were supposed to be paralysed or even to become allies of the French, while the Prussian and northern German troops lacked military power for substantial offensive operations.

The plan itself was reasonable, but the basic analysis concerning feasibility was missing. The approach towards Strassbourg, which had to be the first decisive operation within the campaign plan, required a concentration of French troops at Alsace. Insufficient preparation for this operation urged the French troops to leave their peacetime positions rather incomplete. Some necessary equipment had to be left behind and called-out reservists could not join the troops before departure. Additionally, the railway system represented a substantial bottleneck. Only 100,000 soldiers could be transported to Alsace, while 150,000 soldiers had to remain in Metz to wait for further transportation. The assembly area was logistically not prepared, and the troops had to rely upon available storages in the French fortresses. The French military commander was not concerned about these insufficiencies, given the fact that an attack on Germany was imminent. This perception was so strong that the French staff officers had been provided only with maps of Germany, but not of France.⁵²

Eight days after the declaration of war by France, the French Emperor arrived at the fortress of Metz, which was a position of strategic importance for the French and the Prussians.

⁵¹ Helmuth von Moltke, The Franco-German War of 1870-71, (London: Greenhill Books, 1992 (1888), 2

⁵² Moltke, The Franco-German War of 1870-71, 5

The first assembly of French troops was still not complete, but time was already running out for a surprise attack. He wanted to give immediate orders for the further advance of the army, but his marshals protested and told him that the French army was not ready to attack yet. During this phase of military disorganisation, the French Emperor was informed that a strong German army was assembling between Mayence and Coblenz. Immediately, the French stopped sending military reinforcement towards Alsace and started sending troops towards the Saar. This operational movement changed the French approach from an offensive towards a defensive one. Actually, the French troops were not prepared for this change of focus. The French campaign had already lost its operational dynamic. The two French armies, one under the command of Marshal Macmahon and the other commanded by Marshal Achille-Francois Bazaine, started the campaign without a suitable operational plan and were insufficiently equipped.

Moltke had predicted the French course of action since 1868, and he proved to be well prepared to paralyse the French campaign. The mobilization of Prussian troops had started on 16 July. When the Prussian King arrived in Mainz fourteen days later, 300,000 soldiers had arrived at their well-prepared assembly areas. The Prussian operational plan focused on destruction of the French troops by making a right wheel turn with all three armies starting from the Pfalz and ending at Sedan. French troops had to be attacked whenever possible. Within the first four weeks, eight major battles took place (Woerth, Spichern, Colomben-Nouilln, Vionville-Mars la Tour, Gravelotte-St. Privat la Montagne, Beaumont, Sedan, Noisseville), which eliminated the French army in the field. At the climax of Prussian mobilization in August 1870, German troops were able to engage 500,000 soldiers in the war against France. Still, France was not ready to surrender yet and the whole campaign, including the siege of Paris, took

seven months. During the siege of Paris, twelve battles against newly formed French armies had to be fought by the Germans.

Today's NATO campaign planning demands that military planners should focus on the mission, the desired end states and criteria for success, centres of gravity, unity of command, unity of effort, sustainability, and the necessity to create a plan which is a useful basis for subordinate's planning.⁵³ All such aspects were an integral part of the Prussian campaign planning.

The campaign was based upon an operational goal, which was in line with the strategic objective of warfare. Politics neither limited nor overextended the available military capabilities of Prussia and her allies. Destruction of the French army, including the military surrender of Paris, was specific and militarily achievable. The criteria for success were easily deductible from the operational goal and defined destruction of the two French armies as centres of gravity became main benchmarks for success. Paris, as a third centre of gravity, was to be targeted after these benchmarks had been achieved.

The Prussian campaign was based upon detailed planning and regular exercises. Thorough mobilization planning, including the definition of transportation requirements and the logistic preparation of assembly areas, enabled a timely start of military operations. Accurate calculations of one's own and opposing military capabilities and the definition of most probable courses of action enabled the Prussian troops to conduct a dynamic campaign throughout the end. Modern technology, like railways and telegraphs, were used whenever possible to increase the operational speed.

⁵³ NATO Campaign Planning NATO UNCLASSIFIED (Releasable to PfP/WEU), Chapter 3 – Operations Planning Principles, 3-1

Clear responsibilities within a united command structure transformed the German army from a conglomerate of allies into a homogeneous strike force. Moltke drafted direct commands to all German troops and thereby guaranteed unity in command and homogeneity between campaign planning and the conduct of war. The campaign planning was purposefully based upon easily understandable principles and gave sufficient flexibility to subordinate commanders to focus on the tactical level. The campaign plan was designed to serve as the basis for a subordinate's planning. Unfortunately, some subordinate commanders still lacked sufficient understanding of the operational level and launched counter-productive activities during battles and wasted valuable resources.

Moltke's campaign planning could be easily adapted to different courses of action based upon the outcome of major battles. The Prussians achieved a numerical superiority of German troops at the beginning of the campaign, which could be continuously maintained by the help of on-going mobilization. Additionally, new troop contingents were established during the campaign in order to focus on subsidiary tasks like the guarding of necessary logistical bases in order to guarantee sufficient sustainability of own troops. The German army in the field was enabled to attack continuously the enemy at full strength. All efforts were unified in order to achieve the operational goal.

Moltke ensured throughout the campaign that his subordinate commanders approached battles with a numeric superiority of troops. Thus, he refused to decrease the strength of the field army to guard logistics bases in order to ensure the required sustainability and always created new military contingents for these specific tasks. The continuous dynamic of the campaign was of highest operational importance. Moltke believed that an army could cope with massive losses during battles as long as it maintained the necessary troops at decisive points.

Moltke stated: “ The German troops proved to be superior in all battles of the Franco-Prussian War, even in situations when the French had a numerical superiority...⁵⁴ Operational speed and the ability to concentrate troops at operational centres of gravity in a short timeframe were the main reasons for the outlined superiority of German troops.

The first decisive battle within this campaign was the battle of Gravelotte-St.Privat la Montagna on 18 August 1870. The Prussians had already approached French territory with the First and Second Armies at Pont-a-Mousson on 9 August, faced north and made a flanking movement towards Metz. During the Prussian approach, a first battle with the army of Marshal Bazaine took place on 15 August and ended with retreat of French troops over the river Mosel in order to march towards Verdun. When Marshal Bazaine recognized the flanking manoeuvre of the Prussian troops, he concentrated in a defensive position near Metz. The geography offered a range of heights, which he used for this purpose. The Prussian First Army was ordered to attack the frontline of the French troops, while the Second Army attacked the enemy’s right wing. While the armies took position, the commander of the IX Prussian Corps decided to start an attack independent from the overarching situation of own troops, which ended up in massive losses for his troops.⁵⁵ Overall, the Prussians suffered high numbers of casualties. The Prussian attackers lost more than 20,000 soldiers, while the well-protected French troops had reasonably lower numbers of casualties. From the operational perspective, the battle was clearly won by the Prussians because the outflanked and defeated French troops had to withdraw into the fortress of Metz, where they stayed paralysed until the end of war, guarded by the Prussian First Army.

⁵⁴ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 254-255

⁵⁵ Moltke, The Franco-German War of 1870-71, 52

The second decisive battle was the battle of Sedan on 1 September.⁵⁶ On this date, the united Prussian Second and Third Armies attacked the French Army under the command of Marshal Macmahon. The Germans stopped a French attack and urged the French troops into a defensive position. After a whole day and half a night of intense fighting, the French Army ended up being paralysed in the fortress of Sedan surrounded by German troops. General de Wimpffen, who had taken over command, had to capitulate to the Prussians on 2 September. Moltke personally accepted the capitulation of the French commander. The whole French Army, including the French Emperor, became prisoners of war. This result was certainly the climax of Moltke's career. Some days later, he noted in a private letter to his privy councillor: "All the regiments of the French army but six are now our prisoners; they consist of more than 300,000 men, 10,000 officers, 4 marshals and 1 emperor. Nothing like it has happened since the Babylonian captivity."⁵⁷

Finally, Moltke approached Paris with two armies. In France's capital city, a new government had been established, which refused to surrender despite the fact that the military situation was hopeless. At this point of the campaign, the strategic aim, namely the surrender of Paris as the political centre of France, became synonymous with the operational goal. In contrast to the campaign against Austria, surrender of the French capital was supposed to be crucial for the strategic success of the war.⁵⁸ Bismarck urged Moltke to bombard Paris as early as possible in order to hasten a French surrender. Moltke decided to employ the available artillery first against French fortresses, which threatened to interrupt the rearward

⁵⁶ 1 September became a national holiday in Germany, known as "Sedan day", until the end of the First World War.

⁵⁷ Herms, 228

⁵⁸ An additional consideration might have been the fact that Austria had been a former and was potentially also a future ally of Prussia while France was principally the strategic enemy of Prussia in Continental Europe.

communications of the Prussian army.⁵⁹ This decision was in line with his dictum that political considerations should not affect military conclusions, but it increased the personal tensions with Bismarck. Finally, all French efforts to break the siege of Paris by newly mobilized troops failed and at the end of January 1871, Paris surrendered. Moltke's campaign proved to be a complete military success and enabled Prussia to take over leadership within a united Germany.

CONCLUSION

Moltke put military operations in a sequential context focused to accomplish an operational goal. This basic idea was new at his time, when military science was either highly theoretical (Clausewitz) or dominated by the "Genius of the Battlefield" (Napoleon). Moltke's major achievement was the unspectacular approach to combine the tactical and strategic (political) level by the means of campaign planning. All modern aspects of campaign planning derive from his basic idea. Indeed, Moltke is in line with NATO concerning the different aspects that build the planning focus for military campaigns. Nevertheless, Moltke always tried to achieve the highest possible operational goal in order to support the strategic level in the best possible way. He never really considered making only limited use of the available military assets, which is today's reality in most NATO campaigns.

Moltke aimed towards unity in command at the strategic and the operational levels. The Prussian King and the chief of general staff had to decide upon the conduct of the campaign. This unity guaranteed efficiency and effectiveness. No scarce resources had to be wasted while concentrating upon the operational goal. Nevertheless, Moltke emphasized the necessity for victories at the tactical level. The decisive battle was his idea about breaking the enemy's will. In order to achieve this goal, the subordinate commanders received the freedom for decision at

⁵⁹ Moltke, The Franco-German War of 1870-71, 263

the tactical level. However, all decisions with operational relevance have to be made at the appropriate operational level. Subordinate commanders must not waste scarce resources, like troops or time, during the conduct of a battle.

While Moltke's approach for unity of operational command is still valid, the strategic level of today's NATO campaigns is more differentiated. The North Atlantic Council, which encompasses representatives from all NATO nations, represents the strategic level during NATO campaigns. As well, the approach towards freedom of decision for subordinate commanders has changed. Some assets, like air force assets, are only to be employed from the operational commander after internal harmonization at the strategic level. As an additional constraint, national commanders supervise the employment of national assets provided for a NATO campaign. Subordinate commanders at the tactical level have to act within the constraints of these operational and strategic considerations. For this level, war obviously became much more complex than for Moltke's aristocratic commanders.

In regard to the structural approach for campaign planning, Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke, it can be argued, was the father of modern campaign planning. He established an operational concept, which in principle is still valid for NATO and thus created the operational level of warfare. Moltke's political implications are in contrast to his refined structural analysis. His political beliefs still reflect the late 18th and early 19th century's period of Napoleonic Warfare. Moltke sees the monarch as the personification of undivided military and political power. In his opinion, only the monarch was supposed to have influence upon military affairs at all times, but no politician should interfere with the course of a war. Moltke refused to recognize the advantages of a complex political system, which is able to cope with the dynamic of domestic interests and developments in foreign policy during peacetime and wartime. The

impact of his totalitarian military approach was reflected in the German constitution of 1871 and had a devastating impact on the German society prior to World War I. Moltke once made a prophetic statement that seems to concur with the further development of the German Reich: “God’s ways are not ours to understand. The further development of the world may also require major defeats in order to achieve the divine goal.”⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Schmerfeld, Vol. I, 429

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