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Terence Zuber, *The Moltke Myth: Prussian War Planning, 1857–1871*. Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 2008. Pp. viii, 330. ISBN 978-0-7618-4161-6.

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In *The Moltke Myth*, retired U.S. Army Major Terence Zuber challenges what he feels to be unnecessarily laudatory treatment given by historians to Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke. His book originated as the first half of a doctoral dissertation (Würzburg 2001).¹ It is well researched, making extensive use of primary sources from German archives, especially Moltke's own plans and orders. Zuber relies heavily on French and German studies of Moltke's campaigns and his own on-site inspection of the major battlefields. More generally, he states that experience as an infantry officer allowed him to conduct a "professional analysis" of the relevant historical material.

The author disputes the orthodox opinion of Moltke as a military genius, what he terms the "Moltke Myth." He believes this myth is based on a simplistic formula: Moltke was always victorious, therefore he was a genius. Historians typically blame any crises or mistakes of the Prussian army on the inability of subordinates, especially Prince Fredrick Karl, to understand and execute Moltke's plans (1). In place of serious study of Moltke's plans and orders, we find sweeping generalizations or "little maps, big arrows" (2). This is little more than uncritical hero worship that prohibits the drawing of useful lessons from military history (3).

Many of the original documents relating to the wars of German unification were lost in the Reichsarchiv fire in April 1945, thereby requiring scholars to rely on general staff histories. Zuber insists that these are highly technical works demanding specialist knowledge in order to divine what occurred, implying that only officers or former officers are fit to write military history (7). He attacks German historians of the post-Second World War era, especially Gerhard Ritter, as promoting Moltke merely because he was a military figure unblemished by the disastrous World Wars (8). He also criticizes Gordon Craig, Geoffrey Wawro, Dennis Showalter, and Michael Howard for failure to undertake serious examination of Moltke's campaigns and the planning for them, and the Prussian Army's preparation for combat (9–10, 38). Zuber feels the "Moltke myth" provides a facile explanation of Prussian success in the wars of German unification to historians, many of them well regarded scholars, who have not worked diligently in the primary sources (11–12).

Zuber is especially hard on Arden Bucholz, author of *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning*,² who lists no general staff histories in his bibliography and is overly reliant upon secondary sources (11). Bucholz claims that Moltke used war games to develop his campaign plans, but Zuber goes to great lengths to point out that the games were largely tactical in nature. He successfully shows that early general staff rides were not used to teach strategy or validate war plans, though he does credit Moltke for beginning what would be a lengthy process towards that end (35). Zuber's critique of Bucholz is more compelling than those he makes of other historians, chiefly because he offers more and better evidence to support his charges.

1. The second half was previously published as *Inventing the Schlieffen Plan: German War Planning, 1871–1914* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

2. NY: St. Martin's, 1991.

Much of the book investigates the war games conducted and war plans conceived while Moltke was chief of the general staff. These games used only a small portion of Prussia's forces and their primary purpose was to teach staff officers how to move units. Tactics, the use of terrain, and local security also played a major part, but little consideration was given to supply and logistics (41, 68). Zuber asserts the games and staff rides were poor training devices because of their small scale and their focus on the wrong skill sets. Logistics had never been a Prussian strong suit and Moltke took great pains in the 1867 general staff ride to draw lessons from the recent war with Austria. This training event was the first army-level staff ride and also the first where logistics played a part in the exercise. Clearly, Moltke had learned from Prussia's seven-weeks campaign and was set upon improving army organization, which should be commended (163). The frequent poor use of the road network and difficulty in planning the movement of large units justified Moltke's decision to emphasize these skills as essential parts of training. During the 1860 general staff ride, Moltke chose not to play a period of mobilization and deployment, which Zuber harshly condemns. But, as a former professional officer, he should know that this is not an unusual decision and merely means Moltke wanted to stress other areas, using time normally spent simulating mobilization and deployment (59).

Moltke's war plans are carefully scrutinized. Zuber disparages the (unprecedented) planned use of railroads in the 1859 war. The general staff quickly learned that the rail network was inadequate and that systems to leverage any technological advantage were altogether lacking (22). Moltke sought to remedy this in part by forming the goal of a double-track rail line for the deployment of each corps and by implementing organizational changes within the general staff.

The mass army and rail deployment dominated Prussian war planning until 1914. Zuber acknowledges that the Prussian Army under Moltke was the leader in exploiting the possibilities of both but criticizes him for taking six years to realize their potential and never perfecting their use (23). These criticisms ring hollow: Moltke did incorporate new technologies and sought to squeeze every possible advantage from their use through the creation of systems to attain realistic goals. His appreciation of the advantages of the railroad and new deployment systems played a role in Prussia's victory in two major wars.

Often overlooked in any discussion of Moltke is his politics. As Zuber rightly observes, Moltke felt strongly that Prussia should unify Germany, through war if necessary (32). But he is wrong to belittle Moltke's fear that conflict within Germany could initiate a European-wide war and to claim he was too preoccupied with France (62, 20). Neither of these concerns was without reason: internal strife had in fact led to war in the past and no Prussian could forget his country's humiliation at Jena-Auerstedt and the resulting Treaty of Tilsit (1807). Though often inaccurate, Moltke's grasp of the international situation is no surprise, given German history and the lack of input from the foreign ministry (33).

In many ways, this book attempts to transfer Moltke's laurels to Prince Frederick Karl. The Red Prince's role in the Prussian Army and his contribution to Prussia's victories in the wars of German unification are undoubtedly underappreciated outside of Germany. Fredrick Karl did in fact help to modernize the Prussian Army's training by using inspections to evaluate combat readiness and by focusing on tasks such as marksmanship, field craft, and mobility (82). He also made the radical move of conducting combined infantry and artillery exercises (79).

In step with his excessive criticism of Moltke, Zuber goes overboard in his praise of Fredrick Karl, maintaining, for example, that his pamphlet "On French Tactics" had a huge influence within the Prussian Army; yet only seventy-five copies were published (84). He also confidently pronounces the prince the greatest trainer of troops in modern times and says his tactical leadership brought victory in the wars of unification (88). Zuber even credits him with foreshadowing the reverse slope defense used in both World Wars (87).

Almost all of the sources used in the chapter on Fredrick Karl are biographies; Zuber wants the reader to believe these are credible while works on Moltke's life are not. For example: "While Steinmetz and Moltke were bickering over the telegraph, from 5 to 7 August Frederick Karl was moving his army across the Pfälzerwald. The difficulty and danger inherent in this operation has not been adequately appreciated; Moltke's admirers were neither interested in showing the faults in Moltke's deployment plan, nor in emphasizing how much Moltke owed to Frederick Karl's tactical and administrative skill" (222). Zuber sees a

conspiracy among biographers and historians to credit Moltke for victory at Königgrätz by making Fredrick Karl into a military idiot (139). The obvious stumbling block is that it would have been better for the Prussian monarchy to have a Hohenzollern prince, like Fredrick Karl, receive the praise for defeating the Austrians.

The strongest parts of this book deal with the Prussian army's combat performance, as it related to training and doctrine. In Chapter 3, Zuber argues that the Prussian infantry's proficiency at the regimental level and below was a key to victory in the wars of German unification, contending that tactical acumen can be explained by examining peacetime training. He describes in great detail what made Prussian training unique for the period, with special attention to III Corps under Fredrick Karl, whom, of course, he judges the best trainer and tactical thinker in the army (73). Zuber's comparison of the training of the 1st Brigade, 1st Guard Division, with its combat experience during its attack at St. Privat (278) is superb, as is his treatment of differences between the army's formal and informal doctrine and its habitual—almost instinctive—use of an offensive battle drill (77). He sees traditional Prussian battle drill, rooted deep within the army's culture, as a fluid sequence consisting of making contact with the enemy, developing the situation, and then attacking (53). The ability of Prussian infantry and artillery commanders at the tactical level to adapt this battle drill so successfully at such places as Sedan was remarkable (298).

Zuber flatly states that Moltke had no influence on tactics in the Prussian Army and that tactical doctrine and training were the purview of commanders up to the corps level (73–74). He consistently traces flaws in Moltke's views on tactical matters to his lack of command experience (94). This leaves the reader wondering why so much space is devoted to dissecting Moltke's tactical views if they had no impact on the Prussian Army.

A number of other fallacies undermine the argumentation. Zuber faults Moltke for failing to prepare the Prussian Army to conduct army group operations or to organize an army group advance guard (305, 261). However, the army group did not become a level of command until the First World War and Moltke simply lacked the assets to allow an army group commander to form his own advance guard. This retrojection of current doctrinal and organizational concepts into the past is curious, considering that the author so often stresses that Prussian staff officers did not function like modern ones (209).

Zuber descends into armchair generalship when he insists that the Austrian commander, Benedek, should have used his central position to defeat the Prussians in detail (6). Benedek did not attempt this, because he (unlike Zuber) realized that the Austrian Army, moving as one large unit, was incapable of rapid movement. Moltke's failure to order a pursuit of the Austrians following the Prussian triumph at Königgrätz is censured—Zuber even questions Moltke's strength of will (147)—but armies of this age were incapable of conducting pursuits and any attempt to do so would have met with failure.

Zuber, in recounting Moltke's deployment of the Prussian armies prior to Sedan, maintains Marshal MacMahon could have pounced upon the German armies from the north or, "had he been able to march at a reasonable speed," reached Metz and relieved the Army of the Rhine (290). This ignores that the Army of Châlons was a beaten force before Sedan, neither effectively organized nor able even to supply or move itself.

Perhaps Zuber's most outrageous statement is that Moltke would have been soundly defeated by General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, comparing his generalship to that of the inept Army of the Potomac commanders Joseph Hooker and Ambrose Burnside (307). We are not told how Lee's army of one hundred thousand men armed with muzzle loaders could have defeated Moltke's five hundred thousand equipped with breech-loading rifles and artillery. The comparison of two failed Civil War commanders to Moltke, whose forces defeated the armies of two of the most powerful nations in Europe, is absurdly ahistorical.

While *The Moltke Myth* does raise interesting points, it fails to diminish or "demythologize" Moltke's established reputation. Zuber's contention that "wars are won by fighting, not by planning, and an army fights the way it trained in peacetime" is certainly valid, but he goes too far in claiming Prussian infantry won in spite of, not because of, Moltke (175, 5). Tactical excellence is meaningless unless it serves higher

objectives, something Zuber as an army officer should know. He misguidedly calculates that glory is a zero-sum commodity, in which laurels must be snatched from Moltke in order for Fredrick Karl to enjoy them (308).

The book's overall argument—that nothing positive may be learned from Moltke's career—is ultimately unconvincing and results from special pleading and gross overreaching. Significant portions of Zuber's work depend upon *Der 18. August*,³ which the general staff under Schlieffen compiled and which, he is forced to concede, is highly critical of Moltke. Contrary to his claims, there was no need to create a myth about Moltke's military prowess to furnish the Second Reich with a military hero to counterbalance Napoleon (3, 305). German history is full of great military leaders such as Fredrick the Great. What is needed now is a serious study of Prince Fredrick Karl's contribution to German military history, one not based on a wrong-headed demotion of Field Marshall Moltke.

3. Generalstab, Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung (ed.), *Studien zur Kriegsgeschichte und Taktik*, vol. 5: *Der 18. August 1870* (Berlin 1906).