French Military 1850-80 Part I

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Napoleon III Takes Power

That year revolutions ignited by economic distress swept Europe. Paris, that powder keg of revolutionary passions, erupted in February. King Louis-Philippe, despised for his cautious and inglorious foreign policy, abdicated and fled to
The war had another important consequence for European and German politics: it isolated Austria. Like Prussia, all allied hands at the long siege of Sebastopol exposed Russia's weaknesses and discouraged her from active intervention. Britain and France combined to defeat Russia's attack on the ailing Turkish Empire. The defeat her army suffered at A shift in Great Power relations came sooner than anyone foresaw, as a result of the Crimean War of 1854–6, in which opportunities arose.

Sympathized with the cause of nationalities in Europe. He might be expected to act in their favour where he nurtured hopes of burying the 1815 treaties. Unlike the Bourbon monarchs, but like the republicans of 1848, he deliberate contrast to the black-coated dullness of Louis-Philippe's court. Like all French governments since Waterloo, professions, he cultivated the army, recreated an elite Imperial Guard, and frequently appeared in military uniform, in dockyards and canals. He was careful to cultivate his uncle's old nemesis, Great Britain. Despite his peaceful that 'The Empire means peace', and that his focus would be on internal improvements like building roads, railways, charter championship of universal male suffrage against the bourgeois politicians of the National Assembly who tried to restrict it made him appear a defender of democracy.

His appeal to many groups, combined with shrewd appointments of supporters to key posts, put him in a strong position to extend his presidency, which was due to end in 1852. The National Assembly, however, blocked his attempt to achieve this legally. Louis, with careful planning by his inner circle and the support of reliable generals and his police chief, staged a coup d'état on the night of 2 December 1851, the anniversary of his uncle's victory at Austerlitz. The Assembly was locked out; its leading politicians were arrested and imprisoned.

'Operation Rubicon' did not go as smoothly as planned, however. On 3 December a Deputy of the National Assembly, Dr Baudin, was killed on a Paris barricade. Next day over a thousand protestors manned barricades in the city. Troops opened fire and killed dozens of them and bystanders too. In the provinces over 26,000 people were arrested, half of whom were deported, banished or imprisoned. Throughout the nineteen years of his rule, the 'crime of 2 December' blighted Louis-Napoleon's attempts to win over a hard core of opponents to accept the legitimacy of his regime. Nevertheless, the great majority of French voters supported him when he sought popular endorsement of his coup. He had brought something new to European politics: a dictatorship resting on popular approval, but supported by strict censorship, police surveillance and electoral manipulation. Pressing his advantage, in November 1852 he sought approval for restoration of the Empire and got it by 8 million votes to 250,000, with 2 million abstentions. With effect from 2 December 1852 he declared himself Napoleon III, Emperor of the French, and shortly promulgated a constitution that preserved the forms but not the substance of parliamentary government.

To calm fears at home and abroad that the return of the Empire meant war, he declared at Bordeaux in October 1852 that 'The Empire means peace', and that his focus would be on internal improvements like building roads, railways, dockyards and canals. He was careful to cultivate his uncle's old nemesis, Great Britain. Despite his peaceful professions, he cultivated the army, recreated an elite Imperial Guard, and frequently appeared in military uniform, in deliberate contrast to the black-coated dullness of Louis-Philippe's court. Like all French governments since Waterloo, he nurtured hopes of burying the 1815 treaties. Unlike the Bourbon monarchs, but like the republicans of 1848, he sympathized with the cause of nationalities in Europe. He might be expected to act in their favour where opportunities arose.

**A Franco-German Crisis, 1859**

A shift in Great Power relations came sooner than anyone foresaw, as a result of the Crimean War of 1854–6, in which Britain and France combined to defeat Russia's attack on the ailing Turkish Empire. The defeat her army suffered at allied hands at the long siege of Sebastopol exposed Russia's weaknesses and discouraged her from active intervention in European politics for two decades while she undertook internal and military reforms.

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Finally, in mid-June, Prussia mobilized six of her nine army corps, but as the price of her support sought command of the Crimean War, Prussia obstructed proposals for the German Confederation to mobilize forces to support Austria. Popular sentiment did not produce cooperation between Prussia and Austria. As she had in the crisis of 1840, and much slower getting out of hand, threatening the Papal territories around Rome and alarming French Catholics. Worryingly, too, which there would be diminishing support in France. Revolutionary support for Italian unification in central Italy was Lombardy for Piedmont, but if he wanted to force the Austrians out of Venetia he faced a long and difficult war for further battles. Typhus was spreading in his badly fed army, camped under the torrid Italian sun. He had conquered Austria met and agreed peace terms at Villafranca on 11 July. It was not simply that Napoleon had little stomach for this was for the future. In the wake of Solferino Napoleon decided to end the war. He and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria had wished to stay neutral, but Russian forces at the mouth of the Danube intruded on her vital interests. Her long resistance to joining the western camp won her no friends; yet her eventual signature of an ultimatum to Russia weighed heavily in Russia’s decision to accept peace terms. Russia regarded Austria’s action as rank ingratitude for the military help she had received in 1849, and an intolerable betrayal by a fellow conservative power. In future Austria could expect no Russian help if she needed it; indeed, Russian court circles desired to see her punished. Prussia, which had not intervened against Russia and had a common interest in keeping the Poles suppressed, was on the contrary seen as Russia’s only friend in Europe.

If Russia and Austria were losers, victorious France gained prestige. Napoleon III’s army had acquitted itself well, albeit at the cost of 95,615 French lives. It had made up the majority of allied land forces and had shown itself less incompetent than any other in the field; even if the latest communications technology, the electric telegraph, had proved a mixed blessing. One French commander-in-chief in the Crimea, Canrobert, had resigned in despair over orders wired direct from the Emperor in Paris. The 1856 peace conference was held in Paris, where Napoleon invited the delegates to banquet and waltz at the Tuileries Palace and savoured his moment as arbiter of Europe. His chances of founding a stable dynasty improved when the Empress Eugénie gave birth to a healthy male son, Louis, the Prince Imperial.

In 1858 Napoleon exploited his diplomatic and military advantages in the hope of ‘doing something for Italy’. Having long desired to help the Liberal and national cause there, he secretly agreed with the Kingdom of Piedmont to drive the Austrians out of the parts of Italy they had occupied since 1815. Napoleon was mixing idealism with opportunism, for he had the chance to achieve military success, weaken reactionary Austria while she was isolated, create client states in northern Italy, and regain Nice and Savoy as the price of his support. Yet, as conflict became imminent, his resolve faltered, even once he was sure of Russia’s neutrality. Napoleon was finally pulled over the brink only when, provoked by Piedmontese military preparations, Austria obligingly declared war in April 1859.

The Italian campaign showed how much warfare had changed since Waterloo. The French army was transported by railway and steamship, debouching over the Alps and to the port of Genoa in three weeks. At close hand there was much that was chaotic about French supply arrangements: Napoleon lamented privately to his War Minister that ‘What grieves me about the organization of the army is that we seem always to be ... like children who have never made war ... Please understand that I am not reproaching you personally; rather the general system whereby in France we are never ready for war.’ Yet to outside observers it seemed that the French army was again proving itself the best in the world. With no interference from the sluggish Austrians it completed its concentration, outmanoeuvred the enemy and marched across the north Italian plain, winning bloody battles at Magenta and Solferino in June. If little tactical brilliance was on display, French troops showed the superior élan and willingness to get to close quarters that made them so formidable. Their senior commanders, driven by the instinct that getting close to the enemy was the path to honours and promotion, included men who would command armies in 1870. The courtly aristocrat Maurice MacMahon, already distinguished for his successful assault on the formidable defences of Sebastopol in the Crimea, won his marshal’s baton and the title of Duke for his performance as a corps commander at Magenta.

Decorations, promotions, and victory parades in Milan and Paris were one side of French success in Italy, but another shocked European opinion. Solferino, a savage battle involving 300,000 men, produced 36,000 casualties by the time a thunderstorm of extraordinary violence put an end to fighting. With none of his uncle’s ruthless indifference to high casualties, Napoleon III was sickened by what he saw and smelled on the battlefield next day. In a famous pamphlet, the Swiss traveller Henry Dunant described the horrors of the battlefield. The army medical services were overwhelmed. Dunant’s lurid description rallied widespread support for the initiative of a group of Swiss philanthropists, who in 1863 founded the International Society for Aid to the Wounded, later known as the International Red Cross. The Society’s efforts gave birth to the Geneva Convention of 1864, which laid down an international code for the humane treatment of wounded enemies and prisoners of war, and conferred neutral status on medical personnel. Prussia was among the first and most enthusiastic states to sign the Convention. France signed too at the Emperor’s behest, despite the reservations of military men who had no wish to see hordes of civilian volunteers working in the battle zone.

This was for the future. In the wake of Solferino Napoleon decided to end the war. He and Emperor Franz Josef of Austria met and agreed peace terms at Villafranca on 11 July. It was not simply that Napoleon had little stomach for further battles. Typhus was spreading in his badly fed army, camped under the torrid Italian sun. He had conquered Lombardy for Piedmont, but if he wanted to force the Austrians out of Venetia he faced a long and difficult war for which there would be diminishing support in France. Revolutionary support for Italian unification in central Italy was getting out of hand, threatening the Papal territories around Rome and alarming French Catholics. Worryingly, too, Prussia was mobilizing her army.

In the German states, Napoleon’s war in Italy was execrated as naked aggression against Austria. Fear that Napoleon’s next goal would be the Rhine revived enthusiasm for and debate about German unity as nothing else could. Newspaper and pamphlet denunciation of French ambitions was as virulent as in the crisis of 1840, and much slower to subside. Yet popular sentiment did not produce cooperation between Prussia and Austria. As she had in the Crimean War, Prussia obstructed proposals for the German Confederation to mobilize forces to support Austria. Finally, in mid-June, Prussia mobilized six of her nine army corps, but as the price of her support sought command of
Confederation forces on the Rhine front. The suggestion made sense while Austria was under attack in Italy, but her mistrust of Prussian ambitions in Germany was such that she refused to yield precedence on this point. For the Austrians too, Prussian mobilization provided an incentive to make peace rapidly.

Even without an ultimatum, Prussia’s show of strength was sufficient to cause Napoleon alarm for his eastern frontier. He feared that the Prussians could put 400,000 men on the Rhine in a fortnight. This expectation was slightly exaggerated. Helmuth von Moltke, the studious and methodical Prussian Chief of General Staff, worried that in the present state of the German railway network – much of which was still single-tracked – it would take at least six weeks to move a quarter of a million men to the frontier. At all events, Napoleon concluded that he was in no position to fight the Prussians while continuing his campaign against Austria. Peace was concluded. The Prussians demobilized from 25 July, and the French eventually withdrew all their forces from Italy save for a garrison to protect the Papal territory of Rome, which Catholic opinion at home demanded. As his price for accepting the transfer of the central Italian states to Piedmont, Napoleon received Nice and Savoy following plebiscites in all the affected areas. The recovery of these two territories on France’s south-eastern border was his first reversal of a loss France had suffered in 1815: a gain which boosted the popularity of his regime at home. The other powers, and particularly the German states, were greatly alarmed that it might not be his last. After his Italian adventure it was hardly surprising that Napoleon III was feared as the ruler most likely to disturb the peace of Europe.
Napoleon III Watches the Rhine

In setting out to coerce Austria out of Germany, Bismarck knew that the diplomatic situation continued to favour Prussian ambitions. Neither Russia nor Britain was inclined to an active role in European politics. France, however, remained a key piece on his chessboard. Before making any final decision for war he had been at pains to ensure her neutrality. He had visited the Emperor at the storm-swept resort of Biarritz in south-west France in October 1865 to reassure him that no anti-French alliance had been made at Gastein; nor had Prussia guaranteed Austria’s possession of Venetia, in which the Emperor made clear his close interest. Napoleon listened politely to Bismarck’s suggestions that an enlarged Prussia would be no threat to France, significantly raising no objection. Although no definite commitments apparently were asked for or given on either side, the outcome encouraged Bismarck to reassure Wilhelm that France would not stand in Prussia’s way.

Napoleon seemed to be in an excellent position as the quarrel between Austria and Prussia deepened. Military experts thought Austria the stronger party, but a long war was likely from which France might reap rewards. If he favoured any side, Napoleon seemed to lean towards Prussia, which was a force for change and might prove a useful protégé and even ally in northern Germany. A weakened Austria would enable France to gain influence in the South German states. It would also allow Napoleon to fulfil his promises made in 1859 by liberating restless Venetia from Austrian rule, thereby perhaps restoring his tarnished prestige and influence in Italy. Napoleon encouraged the Italians to ally with Prussia, so facilitating the war.

Would the Emperor ask any reward for his neutrality other than Venetia for the Italians? Napoleon dropped hints to the Prussian ambassador, mentioning the frontiers of 1814 and the Bavarian Palatinate, but declined to specify what he might demand. ‘I cannot point to an item of compensation; I can only assure you of my benevolent neutrality; I shall come to an understanding with your king later,’ he intimated in March 1866. In May he hinted to the ambassador that the Austrians were making overtures to him and that: ‘The eyes of my country are turned towards the banks of the Rhine.’ He appeared to be playing a clever hand, keeping his options open to exploit the situation whatever the
Although Napoleon’s diplomacy was secret, enough was known to inform a powerful public attack. Adolphe Thiers, leader of the French Government in the 1840 crisis, had been imprisoned and exiled briefly by Louis-Napoleon after the coup d’état of 1851. He had returned to politics in 1863, being elected to the Legislature. On 3 May 1866 he gave a superb performance in the Chamber, pushing the boundaries of criticism permitted by the imperial regime. He pointed to the dangers of encouraging Prussia’s aggressive designs and questioned the wisdom of France promoting a new German power and Italian unification. Thiers saw no advantage in revising the 1815 settlement of Germany. Stung by the attack and the stir it created, Napoleon declared at Auxerre three days later that he ‘detested’ the treaties of 1815.

The Emperor’s speech alarmed business circles and the public. Was he about to embark on some new foreign adventure? There was a run on the stock exchange. Ever attentive to public opinion, which strongly favoured peace and neutrality, Napoleon called for a European Congress to settle current disputes. To Bismarck’s relief, Austria would accept only on condition that no power should gain territory, effectively killing the proposal.

In the last days of peace, in June 1866, Napoleon nevertheless could be confident that his diplomacy would win Venetia for the Italians however the war turned out. In return for his pledge of neutrality, the Austrians undertook to surrender Venetia to him if they won. They also agreed verbally that, if they beat the Prussians, Napoleon could have Belgium, and the Rhineland would become a buffer state. Thus, as Prussian troops marched south, it seemed that Napoleon might gain handsomely from the war without shedding a drop of French blood. The Austrians, in desperation, had already offered him his price. Bismarck, meanwhile, was taking a double gamble, both on the military outcome of the war, and on the unspecified reward France might exact for neutrality.

French Army Reform

In the wake of Sadowa, on 30 August 1866, Napoleon signed a decree to re-arm his infantry with breech-loading rifles. The weapon adopted was the Chassepot, named after its inventor Alphonse Chassepot, who for a dozen years had been developing and improving it with encouragement from the Emperor and Marshal MacMahon but in the face of resistance from the War Ministry. Tests of the latest model showed it to be a fine weapon, with a range of 1,200 metres; twice that of the needle gun, to which it was superior in all respects. It could fire six or seven 11mm rounds per minute, and the ammunition was sufficiently light to enable the infantryman to carry ninety rounds with him. It could be fitted with a fearsome-looking sabre-bayonet. Production was put in hand in French arsenals and by contracts placed abroad, and by mid-1870 the army had over a million Chassepots. The weapon was tried out against tribesmen in Algeria, and most spectacularly against Garibaldi’s men at Mentana. ‘The Chassepot worked wonders,’ wired General de Failly to Paris, to the horror of Liberals everywhere, but the news seemed to give assurance that French infantry would be able to meet the Prussians on better than even terms.

Great hopes were placed too on a secret weapon, the mitrailleuse, a machine gun resembling a cannon with a barrel consisting of twenty-five rifled tubes. By inserting pre-loaded blocks, fired by a rotating hand crank, the ‘coffee grinder’ could fire 100 rounds per minute, albeit into a small area, and had an effective range of 1,500 metres. Napoleon had funded development himself up to its adoption in 1865, and five years later 215 were stored ready for use. Beyond a few trained teams, no one knew much about using the new weapon, and it had yet to be tried in battle; but taken together the new armaments would surely give great advantages to the tactical defence.

French weaponry might be a source of confidence, but when Napoleon opened the Legislature in February 1867 he urged that ‘A nation’s influence depends on the number of men it can put under arms.’ However, in pressing for a greatly enlarged army, the imperial government faced a dilemma. If it sounded alarmist about the threat from Prussia it would contradict its own claims to foreign policy success, and could raise tensions that might precipitate a war. Its political credit had sunk so low that its programme was vigorously opposed in the country on the basis of Napoleon’s past record rather than on any dispassionate assessment of the danger to France.

The French army in the 1860s required a seven-year term of service. Men reaching the age of 21 were subject to conscription, but a lottery system gave them a reasonable chance of escaping the obligation to serve. If a conscript drew a ‘good number’ in the lottery, he was free of any further obligation. Even if he drew a ‘bad number’ and was drafted into the ‘first contingent’ of the army, budgetary limitations meant he was unlikely to serve his full term. For the Legislature jealously guarded its right to fix annually the size of the contingent required and the military budget. If the conscript was drafted into the ‘second contingent’ he might have to do only a few weeks’ training in the reserve before being sent home, though he remained subject to recall in wartime. Or he might be in an exempt occupation, and even if he were not the system enacted in 1855 allowed those with money to buy themselves out of the army.

The funds raised from these payments went towards bounties that encouraged serving soldiers to re-enlist, and towards hiring replacements. In theory this provided a long-service force of seasoned professionals; in practice it reinforced a tendency for the army to be the home of ‘old soldiers’ in every sense of the term, supervised by ageing NCOs with some bad ingrained habits. The 15 per cent of soldiers who were hired replacements were viewed as a mercenary element that damaged morale and effectiveness. Promotion in the army was slow, initiative and study were frowned upon, and the stultifying routine of overcrowded barracks far from home, low pay, hard discipline and
Napoleon, long an advocate of universal military service, wanted to overhaul the system radically to increase the regular army to 800,000 men, and to form a new territorial army – the Garde Mobile – on the lines of the Prussian Landwehr, that France could call upon for home defence in wartime. As War Minister he replaced the ageing Randon, who was unconvinced of the case for change, with its ablest advocate, Marshal Niel, who tried to steer army reform through the Legislature during 1867.

The plan to extend military obligations met determined opposition from many quarters. Republicans saw it as a sinister plot to foment war by an untrustworthy authoritarian regime. Their faith in the efficacy of the levée en masse that had saved revolutionary France from invading Prussians and Austrians in 1792–3 remained deep-rooted. Jules Simon advocated the Swiss militia system on the premise that the breasts of patriots who kept a rifle over the hearth would, given a few weeks’ training, be a more than sufficient bulwark against the conscript hordes of foreign despots. The Peace League, which had been born from the Luxembourg crisis, pleaded that in the mid-nineteenth century Europe should be moving towards a brotherhood of nations, and that there should be no place in a prosperous and progressive society for anachronistic militarism. Many bourgeois, though enamoured with histories of France’s military glory, were aghast that they would no longer be able to buy their sons out of military service, and at the prospect of higher taxes. Peasants too resented the blood tax that would take them from the plough. On the right, conservative generals were comfortable with the existing system and indignant at the suggestion that a long-service professional army, toughened by combat in Algeria, Italy, Mexico and the Far East, could not see off double their numbers of enemy conscripts. They found their spokesman in Thiers, who extolled quality over quantity and ridiculed claims about the number of men Prussia could put in the field. This supreme confidence in French military excellence was widely shared, even by those convinced that a war with Prussia was on the horizon. Government supporters feared that universal conscription would be so unpopular that they would lose their seats at the next elections, and Rouher shared their assessment.

Although Niel’s law was finally enacted in February 1868, concessions had eroded the government’s original proposals. The Legislature’s right to decide the size of the annual intake, the lottery, the two-tier contingent system and the right to buy oneself out of the regular army were retained. Conscripted men in the first contingent would serve a total of nine years, including four in the reserve. Men in the second contingent would go straight into the reserve and serve five months. In theory, the obligation to serve five years in the new Garde Mobile would catch all those who escaped service in the first contingent: those who had drawn a ‘good number’ in the lottery, those who hired replacements, those in the second contingent who had completed their time in the reserve, and some who had been exempted from army service. The value of the Garde Mobile was vitiated, however, by the restrictions placed on its training by a Legislature mistrustful of the regime’s militarist designs. Instead of the twenty-five consecutive days of annual training sought by Niel, training was limited to a derisory fifteen days with no overnight stays in barracks.

In his 1869 message Napoleon assured the nation that the reform had been a great success. An official circular declared that the army was now so well prepared to meet all eventualities that France could be ‘confident in her strength’. These claims, and the figures published to support them, may have been intended to mislead the Germans, but they were a delusion. The Niel law resembled universal military obligation sufficiently to make the government deeply unpopular, but failed abjectly in its aim of doubling the number of trained men available for call-up in case of war. The Garde Mobile soon proved a farce. Attempts to muster it at Paris, Bordeaux and Toulouse led to serious disorders. After Niel’s death in August 1869 his successor, Edmond Le Bœuf, did not repeat the experiment, and in July 1870 the Garde Mobile was formidable on paper only. Little provision had been made even to equip it. Partly Le Bœuf was governed by budgetary constraints, just as the government could obtain only a fraction of the funds requested for the programme of modernizing the eastern fortresses begun after Sadowa. But he also shared the scepticism of the upper echelons of the military, who had overweening confidence in the regular army and despised the very idea of a citizen militia. Indeed, they feared that arming and training one would put guns in the hands of revolutionaries who might overthrow the regime.

The unpopularity of conscription merged into a wider wave of discontent that seemed to herald the approaching end of the Second Empire. Relaxation of laws governing the press and public meetings in 1868 produced a proliferation of newspapers and a ‘revolution of contempt’ directed at the regime. Amid this rising tide of criticism and ridicule, the most stinging attacks appeared in La Lanterne, a pamphlet by the aristocratic vaudeville satirist Henri Rochefort. His mordant wit made it a runaway best-seller and a dozen editions were published before the government banned it. In November a young lawyer from Cahors, Léon Gambetta, made a slashing courtroom attack on the Empire while defending the revolutionary Charles Delescluze for organizing a subscription to erect a memorial to Baudin, the half-forgotten deputy who had been killed during the 1851 coup d’état. The charismatic, passionate and eloquent Gambetta emerged as foremost among a new generation of Republicans impatient for change to whom the reputation of Napoleon III as the ‘man of order’ who had saved the country from anarchy after the 1848 revolution meant nothing.

In 1869 France seemed bound for revolution, and the government to have lost its grip. It was often a handicap to be identified as a government candidate in the elections that summer and the big cities voted heavily against the Empire.
The elections were accompanied by riots in the cities, and by a wave of industrial unrest which saw striking miners shot down by troops. Although socialists and representatives of the extreme left did not do well in the elections, the results were an impressive showing for republicans. Opposition candidates polled 3.3 million votes against 4.4 million for government candidates. Gambetta was elected for the working-class Paris district of Belleville, standing on a radical platform that included a condemnation of standing armies as ‘a cause of financial ruin’ and ‘a source of hatred between peoples’. However, he opted to represent a Marseilles constituency where he had also been elected, and at a byelection for Belleville in November Rochefort, returned from exile in Belgium, was elected in his place.

Although Napoleon continued to command the political centre ground, he slowly made concessions in the face of mounting opposition. He granted the Chamber additional powers. Rouher resigned, though he remained a confidential adviser and became President of the Senate. In December the Liberal Émile Ollivier, a former republican, was invited to form a ministry. This appeared to Napoleon to be the best way of saving his regime, though it created tensions among its loyal supporters. Those, including the Empress, Baron Jerome David (another nephew of Napoleon I) and Rouher, who believed that the imperial government needed more authoritarianism, not less, would await their opportunity to sabotage what they saw as the dangerous experiment of the ‘Liberal Empire’.

The Race to the Sea 1914 Part I

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The Race to the Sea left both German and Allied forces exhausted. For the balance of 1914, both sides could do little more than replenish their losses and fortify the continuous lines that now covered the Western Front from the Swiss border to the English Channel. The elaborate trench systems that developed would not be breached until 1918.

Start Date: September 1914

End Date: November 1914

Series of battles in northern France and Belgium in the autumn of 1914. Following the Anglo-French counteroffensive of the First Battle of the Marne (September 5–12, 1914), stalemate emerged along the Aisne River Valley. Consequently, in the area from the Aisne north to the English Channel both Allied and German forces initiated a series of attempts to outflank the other.

This maneuvering, known as the Race to the Sea, was in fact a race to find an open flank on which to resume mobile operations with the intent of bringing the war to a decisive conclusion. From late September until mid-November, however, neither side was able to reach open territory in advance of the other. The result was a series of violent collisions that ended with Belgian, French, and British forces facing their German adversaries in static positions extending from the English Channel to the Swiss border.
Falkenhayn made a final effort on November 10–11. On November 11 the Prussian Guards managed to penetrate near Gheluvelt. In early November, however, pressure on the BEF subsided, as British units at Ypres weathered fierce German attacks during October 29–31. On the afternoon of October 31, Rupprecht's Sixth Army had assembled and began advancing westward north and south of Ypres, respectively. The German units had occupied the city of Lens to the north, while French Territorial units south of Arras were giving way under heavy German pressure.

Both Castelnau and Maud'huy suggested retreat. Unwilling to concede Arras, Joffre quickly reorganized the French forces in the vicinity. Detaching Maud'huy's force from the Second Army, Joffre designated it the Tenth Army and placed both formations under General of Division Ferdinand Foch. From October 5, Foch forbade retirement from Arras.

Despite heavy losses, French forces held their positions. By the evening of October 6, German pressure had diminished as Falkenhayn decided to cease attacks in the vicinity. Both he and Joffre subsequently turned their attention northward.

While Rupprecht's German Sixth Army attempted to turn the Allied flank in northern France in late September, Falkenhayn had directed the III Reserve Corps, commanded by General of Infantry Hans von Beseler, to besiege the fortified Belgian port city of Antwerp. The capture of Antwerp and destruction of the Belgian Army, which was using the city as a base, would ensure the safety of German lines of communication west. It would also remove any impetus for the dispatch of British forces to Belgium. Falkenhayn hoped that this, combined with the operations of the Sixth Army to the south, would leave the Germans in control of French and Belgian territory from the Somme River north to the English Channel, enabling their forces to outflank the Anglo-French armies and march on Paris.

Beseler's forces opened the siege of Antwerp on September 28. After subjecting the city to an intense artillery bombardment, on October 1 Beseler initiated infantry attacks. With only limited French and British assistance forthcoming, Antwerp capitulated on October 10. Most of the Belgian Army, however, escaped and retired behind the Yser River. This development presented a problem for Falkenhayn. In early October he had assembled in Belgium the Fourth Army under Colonel General Albrecht, Duke of Württemberg. Falkenhayn intended to send the Fourth Army south into France in an attempt to outflank the Allied left wing, but the presence of 53,000 Belgian troops at the Yser inhibited Albrecht's freedom of movement.

Consequently, on October 18 the German Fourth Army attacked Belgian positions along the Yser. Although they were supported by French forces and British naval guns in the English Channel, the Belgians were slowly forced to give ground. In desperation, King Albert on October 27 ordered the locks at Nieuport opened, inundating the countryside. By October 31 the rising water level had created an impassable barrier for the Germans, thereby securing the Allied left flank.

By this point German and Allied efforts were concentrated around the Belgian town of Ypres. In early October the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) had begun transferring from positions on the Aisne to northern France and Flanders. As elements of the BEF arrived in the area between La Bassée and Ypres, British commander Sir John French directed them to advance. By mid-October, however, they faced increasing resistance from German cavalry, which precluded the arrival of more substantial forces. By October 19, elements of Albrecht's Fourth Army and Rupprecht's Sixth Army had assembled and began advancing westward north and south of Ypres, respectively. The BEF was forced onto the defensive, but the timely arrival of French and Indian reinforcements prevented a German breakthrough.

By late October, Falkenhayn's search for open ground was increasingly desperate. In an effort to resume mobile operations before the arrival of additional Allied troops, he quickly assembled a new force between the Fourth and Sixth Armies. It consisted of six divisions and more than 250 heavy guns formed into Army Group Fabeck, under General of Infantry Max von Fabbeck. Falkenhayn directed Fabbeck to punch through the fragile British line south of Ypres, resulting in the First Battle of Ypres (October 19–November 22).

British units at Ypres weathered fierce German attacks during October 29–31. On the afternoon of October 31, German forces nearly broke through at Gheluvelt. In early November, however, pressure on the BEF subsided, as French reinforcements launched counterattacks around Ypres and mounting German losses diminished the intensity of their offensive. Falkenhayn made a final effort on November 10–11. On November 11 the Prussian Guards managed
to crack the British line south of Ypres, but the British were able to blunt it. By November 13 the fighting around Ypres had largely subsided, and the Race to the Sea was over.

THE RACE TO THE SEA; AND WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

The counter-attack on the Marne was indeed the end of the Schlieffen Plan; but it was also the beginning of Churchill’s ‘desperate and vain appeals against the decision of fate’ – appeals that on the Western Front would ultimately cost the lives of over half a million men of the British army.

On the Aisne, meanwhile, the armies began digging in. At first they dug simple, shallow rifle-pits, but as more and heavier artillery was brought up, the trenches were dug deeper and became more elaborate, the Germans generally with the advantage of the better ground. Both sides began ‘feeling for the flank’ again – trying to find the end of the opponent’s line, to force the defender to fall back so as not to be enveloped. At first it was local, the French on the left attacking with troops already in the line and the Germans likewise, before becoming more deliberate, with both Joffre and Falkenhayn trying to find ‘fresh’ troops for the task. For whatever the dashed hopes of the Schlieffen Plan, Moltke’s successor had first to make sure the situation did not, at the very least, get any worse. Surmising that the British, having been thoroughly blooded, would now reinforce the BEF, he thought it well to capture the Channel ports and cut their supply lines – except that the lines of communication did not run through the northern Channel ports. Besides, the Grosser Generalstab was still hankering after its Cannae opportunities might be created from unexpected tactical success. After all, a fortnight earlier, General Paul von Hindenburg’s 8th Army had destroyed the better part of the Russian 2nd Army at Tannenberg, which for a while at least took the pressure off the Oberste Heeresleitung. For the time being, the flanks of both sides hung tantalizingly in the air, with 200 miles of open country to the west: perhaps there was still time to knock out France (and now the British) and then turn east with all the efficiency of the Prussian (and, they must hope, the French and Belgian) railway system to defeat the Russian bear?

During late September and early October there was a continuous series of battles in Picardy, Artois, and Flanders, Joffre having matched the efficiency of the Eisenbahnamt by moving General Noel de Castelnau’s 2nd Army from Lorraine to Amiens, while Falkenhayn moved Crown Prince Rupprecht’s (Bavarian) 6th Army opposite him to St Quentin in a remarkable but little-known railway race (through Luxembourg). On 17 and 18 September the French attacked at Noyon; the Germans countered by attacking on the French flank towards Montdidier. On the twenty-second the French attacked north of Roye; and again the Germans countered by attacking on the flank. On 27 and 28 September Rupprecht struck near Albert, but Castelnau managed once more to halt them. With each attempt the line was prolonged west and north, in what would become known as ‘the Race for the Sea’, though the object was not so much reaching the coast as re-establishing a war of manoeuvre.

The search for the open flank now moved even further north, towards Arras. Two infantry corps and one of cavalry from Castelnau’s 2nd Army, under General Louis de Maud’huy, advanced up the River Scarpe towards Vimy. Rupprecht tried to outflank him and on 3 October sent his reserve corps north of Arras and the IV Cavalry Corps further north towards Lille. By the evening of the 4th Maud’huy was in serious danger of being cut off, having lost contact with his cavalry to the north, and a gap having opened on his southern flank. He told Joffre he would have to withdraw, and asked in which direction. Joffre, desperate to protect the industrial areas of Artois, ordered Maud’huy to hold his ground, and at once set about reorganizing the northern armies. Maud’huy’s detachment became yet another new army, the 10th (remarkable promotion for a man who in July had been commanding a brigade), and the 2nd and 10th, along with any other troops in the area, mainly Territorials, were grouped together under the command of Ferdinand Foch, as Joffre’s deputy. The front held; for the moment the crisis was over.

Sir John French, and Kitchener, watching this slow-motion race for the sea, had been getting anxious, and had decided that the BEF must shorten its lines of communication as soon as possible, not least by resuming its place on the left flank of the French, rather than remaining sandwiched between armies. It were better, in any case, that Calais, Boulogne, Dunkirk or Dieppe (perhaps even Ostend and Zeebrugge) replace St Nazaire as the port of entry – or ‘base’, as it was called in Field Service Regulations. Besides, if the Channel ports fell into German hands, the Channel itself would soon be full of mines and U-Boats. Churchill, as first lord of the Admiralty, was only too well aware of the threat, and was already preparing to send a Royal Marines Brigade and two more of the Royal Naval Division – reservist sailors not required for ships’ crews, half-retrained as infantry (among them, hastily commissioned, Rupert Brooke – ‘Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour, / And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping …’). With aircraft of the Royal Naval Air Service and an improvised force of armoured cars, as well as his own (personally chosen) Yeomanry regiment, the Oxfordshire Hussars, they were to screen the northern ports – and later, at the beginning of October, would sprint to Antwerp to stiffen the resolve of the Belgian garrison.

On 29 September Sir John French sent a note to Joffre:

*Ever since our position in the French line was altered by the advance of General Manoury’s 6th Army to the River Ourcq, I have been anxious to regain my original position on the left flank of the French Armies. On several occasions I have thought of suggesting this move, but the strategical and tactical situation from day to day has made the proposal inopportune. Now, however, that the position of affairs has become clearly defined, and that the immediate future can be forecasted with some confidence, I wish to press the proposal with all the power and insistence which are at my disposal. The moment for the execution of such a move appears to me*
to be singularly opportune.

The opportuneness lay in part with the imminent arrival of significant reinforcements, including the newly formed 7th and 8th Divisions (both almost exclusively regular) and the leading elements of the Indian Corps and the Indian Cavalry Corps (via Marseilles, as Churchill's 1911 memorandum had suggested). 'In other words,' Sir John French explained, 'my present force of six Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions will, within three or four weeks from now, be increased by four Divisions and two Cavalry Divisions, making a total British force of ten Divisions (five Corps) and four Cavalry Divisions.'

Joffre agreed at once, and the BEF began its move west.

At the same time, French began preparing to send an infantry and a cavalry division to Antwerp, but on 8 October King Albert was forced to abandon the city, leading the Belgian army west and south along the coast until they could take up a coherent line of defence on the River Yser. A week later, in yet another attempt to outflank the German line, the BEF crossed into Belgium, to Ypres, to attack east along the Menin Road. As they did so, the Duke (Albrecht) of Württemberg's 4th Army, which had been railed from the Upper Aisne and reinforced by fresh troops from Germany, and from the siege of Antwerp after its surrender on 10 October, attacked the Belgians on the Yser. They were eventually halted when on the twenty-first the King ordered the sea-locks at Nieuport to be opened, flooding the surrounding country.

By now Sir John French had some 250,000 men at his command. Urged on by Foch, he went onto the offensive along the Menin Road on 21 October. His forces soon ran into trouble, however, the speed of the redeployment of Rupprecht's Bavarians and Albrecht's 6th Army taking both GQG and GHQ by surprise. A month's hard – at times, desperate – fighting would follow. Many of the newly formed Cavalry Corps went into action for the first time – dismounted, the horses being sent to the rear and the men taking up their rifles to hold Messines Ridge south of Ypres. The first regiments of the Territorial Force would be blooded too (those that had volunteered in sufficient numbers for service overseas) – the London Scottish, the first Territories to go into action, losing half their strength in the process. And the Germans would have their first sight of the turbans, pugarees and Gurkha pill-boxes of the Indian Corps. At Hollebeke on 31 October Sepoy Khudadad Khan of the Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchi Regiment won the first ever Indian VC, when it looked as if the Germans might break the line: 'The British Officer in charge of the [machine-gun] detachment having been wounded,' ran the citation, 'and the other gun put out of action by a shell, Sepoy Khudadad, though himself wounded, remained working his gun until all the other five men of the gun detachment had been killed.' He would later receive a Viceroy's Commission as subedar.

That last day of October was indeed a desperate time, the moment when it looked as if the dyke would rupture, a day when individual soldiers in individual regiments made a difference. If there were to be an accolade of saver of that dyke it would almost certainly go to the 2nd Worcesters, the only troops left in front of Ypres that morning as the Germans managed to capture Gheluvelt, key to the Ypres–Menin gap and therefore to the open country beyond. The battalion had already been reduced to 400 (less than half its embarkation strength in August), and they would lose another 200 recapturing this vital ground. Major Edward Hankey, who had taken command a month before when the battalion's lieutenant-colonel was promoted to command the brigade, led what remained of the Worcesters across 1,000 yards of open fields, under artillery fire, to drive the Germans from the grounds of the Chateau Gheluvelt, managing then to hold on against the inevitable counter-attacks just long enough for reinforcements to be cobbled together from the rest of the brigade to plug the hole.

On 11 November there was another crisis astride the Menin road, when the 1st and 4th Brigades of the Prussian Guard attacked, breaking through the defence line and getting to within 2 miles of Ypres. Only the bayonets of the 2nd Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and a scratch force of Grenadiers, Irish Guards and the Royal Munster Fusiliers were able to restore the situation – but at shattering cost, including the loss of the brigadier, Charles FitzClarence, who had won the VC at Mafeking.

The attack of the Prussian Guard, however, like that of the Garde Impériale at Waterloo, was the high-water mark of the German offensive at Ypres, and in the days that followed the fighting slackened. The BEF dug in – just as they had on the Aisne – but deep, and the Western Front began its consolidation into a continuous line of trenches that would eventually stretch from the North Sea coast to the Swiss frontier. But the fighting in October and November, on top of the August retreat and the counter-attack on the Marne, was the end of the old BEF – the four divisions that had marched up to Mons, and the fifth and sixth that had joined them thereafter. The casualties for the six weeks of the First Battle of Ypres, as it became known, were 58,155 (7,960 dead, 29,562 wounded, 17,873 missing, the remainder classified 'sick'); the BEF had arrived in France with around 80,000 infantry, which by the end of October had increased to 130,000, and which on paper stood at about 150,000 by the close of First Ypres. On 30 November the officially recorded figure for casualties of all kinds since the beginning of hostilities was 86,237. Most of these were in the infantry, where the officers and NCOs led from the front. The conclusions hardly need spelling out. The 1915 edition of Debrett's Peerage was delayed for many months until the editors had been able to revise the entries for almost every blue-blooded family in the kingdom.

Regulars from all over the empire would now be recalled and fed piecemeal into Flanders, reinforced in equally piecemeal fashion by the Territorials once the necessary legislation had been enacted, and then from the summer of
1915 by the men of Kitchener’s ‘New Armies’, the volunteers who were flocking in their many tens of thousands to answer the secretary for war’s famous poster-call ‘Your Country Needs YOU!’ until in January 1916 conscription was introduced.

Need so many – the core of the professional army – have died in those first two months? In his memoir of the BEF’s opening battles, Forty Days in 1914, Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, Henry Wilson’s successor-but-one as DMO (1916–18), writes plainly of the missed opportunities: ‘We have in the end gained complete victory [his book was published in 1919], but we could have gained it more quickly had our Governments been organized for war.’ This is the point at which, therefore, while recognizing that the BEF was standing (with the French) in the path of the greatest military juggernaut the world has ever seen, we must scotch any idea that what happened in the ‘Battle of the Frontiers’ was inevitable. Actions have consequences; and inaction has consequences too. Quoting the historian E. H. Carr is a perilous business, but in this he is worth the risk: ‘Nothing in history is inevitable, except in the formal sense that, for it to have happened otherwise, the antecedent causes would have had to be different.’

The futile encounter-battle on the Mons–Condé canal, the ensuing battle at Le Cateau and the subsequent retreat – these need not have happened if the BEF had concentrated at Amiens rather than Maubeuge, as both Sir John French and Kitchener had wanted at the 5 August war council (at which Churchill had suggested they should concentrate well to the rear of the French army to form a strategic reserve) – and as Lanrezac himself had suggested to Joffre as late as 15 August. On 21 September, Haig – whose handling of I Corps in the fighting at Ypres was to earn him considerable acclaim – wrote in unequivocal terms to the King’s assistant private secretary, Major Clive Wigram, whom he had known in India: ‘I am glad you already realize how wrong it was to have rushed the Army north to Mons by forced marches before our reservists had got their legs. GHQ had the wildest ideas at this time of the nature of the war and the rôle of the British Force.’

Had this alternative plan been adopted, though, would it have meant that the Germans would have been able to turn the flank of Lanrezac’s 5th Army?

No. From 20 August, when Moltke told Kluck that ‘a landing of British troops is reported at Boulogne: their advance from about Lille must be reckoned with’, both the OHL and Bülow, commanding (ineffectively) the 1st and 2nd Armies as an army group, were acutely conscious of the danger to the 1st Army’s (Kluck’s) flank. Two days later, the 1st Army halted for two critical hours to realign west in order to meet what Kluck believed was the BEF detraining at Tournai but turned out to be French Territorials. By 24 August – the date Sir John French had originally given to President Poincaré and Joffre before agreeing to bring it forward to the twenty-first – the BEF would have been ready at Amiens to take the offensive. Its divisions could then have been transported via the excellent French railway system the 50 miles to St Quentin, whence it would have posed too great a threat to the 1st Army’s right for Kluck to have risked trying to envelop Lanrezac’s 5th Army south of Maubeuge. In the meantime, Lanrezac would have had to shift for his own left flank; but this was, in essence, what he was doing anyway in the withdrawal on 22 August. Without the BEF on the Mons–Condé canal, Kluck would of course have had a free run south through Mons, but he could not have presented a flank to the fortress of Maubeuge without impunity, nor could he have made any real turning movement north of Le Cateau because of the Forêt de Mormal – and, anyway, Lanrezac was already taking precautions by withdrawing to the Sambre. Lanrezac’s position would have been little different from the actual situation on 26 August since the BEF had by then been driven away to the south and west, and the gap was opening up – except, of course, that Kluck’s 1st Army would have been in greater strength and better shape without the encounters with British rifle fire. From 27 August the course of events would, at worst, have been no different from actual events, the BEF retreating from St Quentin on the same line – but without the losses incurred at Mons and Le Cateau, with greater cohesion between its two corps, and perhaps with much better cooperation and contact with the French. Its subsequent performance in the Marne counter-offensive might then have been more spirited, with a chance of ‘bouncing’ the Aisne heights and preventing the Germans from consolidating.

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**The Race to the Sea 1914 Part II**

Posted on **April 2, 2019** by **MSW**
But Churchill had put his finger on the bigger issue in his memorandum to the Committee of Imperial Defence for the meeting on 23 August 1911: what was the strategic role of the BEF? In the discussion at that meeting on the BEF’s status of command, Reginald McKenna, the then first lord of the Admiralty, had suggested that ‘if a British force were to be sent at all, it should be placed under French command’. Perhaps McKenna knew that this would not be palatable to the general staff (which indeed it wasn’t, as Henry Wilson at once protested), thereby advancing the cause of the naval option; but in any case, ‘Mr Churchill dissented emphatically’, say the minutes: ‘The whole moral significance of our intervention would be lost if our Army was merely merged in that of France.’

This was a moot point – perhaps Churchill was thinking of his illustrious ancestor’s difficulties with the Dutch field deputies in the war with France – but it needed mooting nevertheless: how was Britain to exert the greatest moral effect – and, implicitly, at the lowest cost? But there was more at stake than this. The question was really what was to happen after the Germans had invaded; for, having the initiative and therefore being able to concentrate, they would certainly force the frontiers at one point or another. Churchill had grasped the difference between merely winning battles and winning the war: ‘France will not be able to end the war successfully by any action on the frontiers. She will not be strong enough to invade Germany. Her only chance is to conquer Germany in France’. This, he said, would mean the French accepting invasion, including even the investment of Paris, but such a policy might depend on knowing that the British would be coming to France’s aid on land – which, by return, would depend on our knowing what were the French intentions. This was, of course, a view entirely at odds with that of the French general staff, who did indeed envisage the invasion of Germany, or at least, certainly to begin with, that former French territory occupied by Germany (Alsace-Lorraine) – which for a few days in August 1914 was largely what happened. However, Churchill’s bold assertion was based on the calculation that by the fortieth day of mobilization:

Germany should be extended at full strain both internally and on her war fronts, and this strain will become daily more severe and ultimately overwhelming, unless it is relieved by decisive victories in France. If the French army has not been squandered by precipitate or desperate action, the balance of forces should be favourable after the fortieth day [and improving] ... Opportunities for the decisive trial of strength might then occur.

It could easily be supposed that this memorandum had been written in late 1914 rather than the summer of 1911: the fortieth day of German mobilization was 9 September, the day the BEF crossed the Marne on its way to the Aisne. Historians have sometimes commented on Churchill’s prescience, but none has ever fully examined his conclusion that the French must accept penetration of the borders and organize to defeat the Germans thereafter, the part the BEF might play in such an operational plan, and the possible outcome.

So how did Churchill see the BEF’s contributing to these ‘opportunities for the decisive trial of strength’?

In short, by generating a BEF that could act decisively ‘instead of being frittered into action piecemeal’ – the argument, indeed, that Haig was making at the time of the 5 August war council, and in his preceding letter to Haldane: ‘so that when we do take the field we can act decisively’. Churchill envisaged the immediate despatch of a BEF of four divisions plus the Cavalry Division, for its ‘moral effect’, to be joined by the two remaining divisions ‘as soon as the naval blockade is effectively established’ (and the threat of invasion thereby ended). These would assemble
not at Maubeuge for incorporation in the French line of battle, but well to the rear, at Tours, more or less equidistant between St Nazaire and Paris. As soon as the colonial forces in South Africa could be mobilized, the 7th Division would be recalled from there and its stations in the Mediterranean. To these would be added 15,000 Yeomanry and TF cyclist volunteers. And – perhaps the greatest gamble (though in fact it would eventually happen) – six out of the nine divisions of the Italian Army could be brought to the BEF, ‘as long as two native regiments were moved out of India for every British regiment’ (Churchill was as aware as any – and more than most – of the peculiar mathematics and chemistry of the Indian Army): a further 100,000 troops, ‘brought into France via Marseilles by the fortieth day’.

In total, by 14 September this would have furnished a BEF of some 290,000 (Haig had written to Haldane of 300,000), which the actual arrival of the 7th and 8th Divisions and the Indian Corps before Ypres shows was perfectly possible. And, although Churchill does not mention it, there would also have been time to assemble additional heavy artillery.

But what, meanwhile, of the gap which a BEF at Tours would have left in the French line of battle? In his letter to Haldane, Haig had made the filling of this gap, so to speak, a fundamental assumption: ‘I presume of course that the French can hold on (even though her forces have to pull back from the frontier) for the necessary time for us to create an army ...’

The answer lay with the nine French divisions – two corps – earmarked for the army of observation on the Italian border. These could have been put at notice to move as soon as the Italians declared their neutrality on 3 August (a decision confirmed to the second war council by Grey on 6 August), and the move begun as soon as French intelligence could confirm that the Italian army, although recalling some reservists to the colours, was not moving to a war footing (Austria was, after all, the more recent enemy, and France the ally: there was every reason for Rome to fear an Austrian grab in Venezia). If such a redeployment sounds injudicious – perilous even – in the event this is what did indeed happen: the French Army of the Alps was stood down on 17 August (at which time much of the BEF was still encamped near their ports of landing). Though it would have been a last-minute affair, its six in-place divisions (five of them regular), which were surplus to Plan XVII, would have been available to re-deploy to the left of Lanrezac’s 5th Army, where, indeed, the erstwhile commander of the Army of the Alps, d’Amade, had already been sent to take command of the Territorial divisions. The great advantage that the French enjoyed – though they failed to make full use of it – was that the Schlieffen Plan unfolded at walking pace, and on exterior lines, observable by air, while the strategic movement of French troops, on interior lines, could be conducted at the speed of the railway engine. Never, before or since, has a commander-in-chief had so much time in which to make his key decisions. That is the real import of A. J. P. Taylor’s quip about ‘war by railway timetable’ – not that Europe’s leaders were forced into war by movement schedules. The Elder Moltke had said it to Bismarck: ‘Build railways, not forts.’

If these dispositions had been made, there is no reason to suppose that the situation at the end of September would have been any different from that which actually transpired – with French forces mounting a successful counter-attack on the Marne, and then the stalling on the Aisne. There was an undoubted moral effect in having the BEF in the line, and it certainly ‘punched above its weight’, but it is unreasonable to suggest that the French would not have been able to manage things on their own if they had been able to replace the BEF with the same number of their own regulars. Joffre, seeing the enemy, as it were, off guard, had brilliantly improvised and delivered a blow on the Marne that had sent the flower of Brandenburg reeling; but it was not enough. In the terminology of modern doctrine, he had executed the first two of the four requirements of victory – ‘find’ and ‘fix’: he had found the weak point, Kluck’s and Bülow’s flank, and he had fixed them – temporarily (which is all that can be expected) – on the Aisne. What he then had to do was ‘strike’ and then ‘exploit’ (as suggested by Churchill’s ‘Her only chance is to conquer Germany in France’).

However, at the time of launching the counter-offensive on the Marne Joffre had not been able to create a striking force to exploit success. What he needed was what the BEF could have offered had it been allowed to build its strength at Tours – a fresh, strong, virtually all-regular army numbering nearly 300,000. It should have been the winning move.

Not, however, simply to attack on the Aisne, to apply more brute force where brute force had already exhausted itself. What was needed was overwhelming force applied as a lever rather than as a sledgehammer. The German flank was not just open in a localized way after the retreat to the Aisne; the entire Schwenkungsflügel – the ‘pivot’ or ‘swing’ wing – was extended in an east–west line through mid-Champagne and southern Picardy, and it was beginning to bow back on the right. Indeed, with each successive encounter on the extremity of the flank, even as the Germans brought up new troops, the line backed further north rather than projecting further west. In the third week of September, with Antwerp still holding out, the BEF, some 300,000 strong, fully equipped, its reservists fighting fit, and with the RFC to direct its advance, could have launched a massive counter-stroke from Abbeville, a major rail junction, east between Arras and Albert (or even more boldly, further north between Arras and Lille), on a front of at least 30 miles – with strong reserves and artillery, screened by the Cavalry Corps, with the Indian Cavalry Corps ranging further north towards the high ground at Vimy.

With a simultaneous offensive by the French along the Aisne – indeed, across the whole front, to fix the Germans in place so that they could not further reinforce the right – all that Falkenhayn’s 1st, 2nd and 4th Armies would have been able to do to avoid being enveloped would have been to turn through 90 degrees to face west. But their pivot point...
would have had to be somewhere that did not form too sharp an angle and therefore a dangerous salient, and with
Belgian forces perhaps making another sortie from Antwerp, it is probable that this pivot point would have to have
been Rheims, or even Verdun. In any case, with the BEF pressing hard, and taking account of its own extended lines of
communication, in particular the railheads, there would not have been the manoeuvre space for Kluck’s 1st Army to
take direction through 90 degrees west of a line running north–south through Mons and Maubeuge. Had
Falkenhayn got intelligence of the move of the BEF to Abbeville he might have made an orderly withdrawal from the
Aisne to the Mons–Maubeuge line, dug in and brought up heavy artillery to halt the BEF’s advance; but this in turn
would have given the BEF the option of avoiding making a direct attack and again threatening to turn the German
right flank – further north, between Mons and Brussels. In the best case for the allies, with the Germans unable to find
a natural line on which to try to halt the BEF, and a renewed offensive by Franchet d’Espéréy’s and Foch’s armies to
threaten the 1st, 2nd and 4th Armies’ lines of communication, Falkenhayn would have had to pull back to the Meuse
below Namur. He would then have had to garrison the river with all the troops he could find as allied strength built up
on the Lower Meuse as far as Liège and within closing distance of the Dutch border in the Maastricht corridor.

Supposing, then, that at that point the Germans had been able to check further allied progress east – even perhaps, by
a desperate reverse-Schlieffen transfer of troops from East Prussia – the situation in the west would have seen a
strategic sea change. Joffre, to exploit, could now have used the growing Russian strength on the Eastern Front to his
advantage: Falkenhayn would have been truly caught between two giantammers. And with the Germans now on the
defensive, Joffre would have had the choice of where to concentrate. With so catastrophic an end to the whole
Schlieffen ‘plan’, it is not impossible to imagine the Kaiser’s suing for terms.

However, on 4 September the Triple Entente powers had signed a pact: ‘The British, French, and Russian
Governments mutually engage not to conclude peace separately during the present war. The three Governments agree
that when terms of peace come to be discussed, no one of the Allies will demand conditions of peace without the
previous agreement of each of the other Allies.’ All could not go quiet on the Western Front unless the Germans
ceased fire on the Eastern.

It was ironic that, by this pact, the British were now in effect pledged to the defeat of the Germans not just in France
but in Russia too – an object that would have been scarcely conceivable to the cabinet a week before the war began. Of
course, in December 1917 a new (Bolshevik) Russian government would conclude a very separate peace, but that was
not an option for a nation with ‘honour’, the noun that had propelled Britain to war. It is possible, therefore, to
imagine the war entering 1915 with a return to the Elder Molière’s view of the two-front problem: stay on the defensive
against France, check the Russians by a paralysing stroke (another Tannenberg, perhaps), and then turn westward to
counter-attack when the inevitable allied offensivecame – the aim being, since outright victory was no longer possible,
to cripple both opponents and thereby bring about a favourable peace.

But the allies would have been in a vastly superior strategic position to that in which they actually found themselves in
1915. The possession of most of Belgium would have been significant in terms of the extra men and materiel available.
And the failure of Germany to achieve victory would not have been lost on the neutrals. It was almost certainly
impossible that Britain could have avoided war with Turkey, but if it were possible in May 1915 to persuade Italy, who
in August 1914 had been in alliance with Germany and Austria, to enter the war on the allies’ side – as she did, against
Austria-Hungary on 28 May, and Germany on 28 August – it should also have been possible to persuade the Dutch
and the Danes to consider their position too. The Dutch obligation to defend Belgian neutrality under the Treaty of
London was sufficiently vague to permit the application of diplomatic pressure, especially once the Germans had
been removed from the southern Dutch border. It seems likely at least that some way would have been found to open
the Scheldt to allied shipping, and to close the ‘breathing line’ to Germany. The Danes were in just as ambiguous a
position, if for different reasons. They had no connection with any treaty, only a pragmatic decision to make: which
side would win? Or rather, how might the peace terms work to their advantage? Their neutrality was weighted towards
Germany, but a Germany fighting defensively on the Meuse would not have been the same as a Germany in
possession of almost all of Belgium and a large slice of northern France. There was Danish territory to recover in
Jutland, and although in the event the Treaty of Versailles would restore a large part of Schleswig to Denmark (and,
indeed, would have given her all of it, and Holstein, had the Danes not feared German irredentism), Copenhagen
could not have counted on it. There was, again, room for the diplomats to work.

At the very least the BEF counter-stroke, forcing the Germans back into Belgium, perhaps as far as the Meuse, would
have given the allies far better ground on which to fight – and with a strong Belgian army, and a much shorter front
(and therefore more reserves). At the very best, an offensive by British, French and Belgian armies on the Meuse in the
spring of 1915, perhaps being allowed to use the Maastricht corridor, with Dutch–Danish action directed against the
Kiel Canal and Heligoland, could have ended the war that summer.

That said, the German army’s (the German nation’s) visceral ability to fight on, despite all logic, was formidable, as the
rest of the war demonstrated. However, the ground on which the allies fought need not have been the same; and the
war was not immutably programmed to run until November 1918. At best the Dardanelles campaign to circumvent the
deadlock on the Western Front need not have been attempted. The 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland might not have taken
place, or at least might not have taken the same embittering course, for Britain would not have appeared to be on the
ropes (there was more than a little opportunism in the IRA’s decision to ‘declare war’); and with some sensible
concession to home rule the Union might still today have been of Great Britain and Ireland (always assuming, of
course, that Ulster could have been placated – a big ‘if’). Perhaps the greatest bounties, however, would have been the
failure of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia before it even started, and a Germany in which fascism did not take hold.

Is this all too fanciful?

Three decades on, in the summer of 1943, after he had been exerting his indomitable will on the nation and its armed
forces for three years of war, Churchill startled a group of his close associates by remarking that ‘whoever had been in
power – Chamberlain, Churchill, Eden, anyone you liked to mention – the military position would now be exactly the
same. Wars had their own rules, politicians didn’t alter them, the armies would be in the same position to a mile.’ This
‘Tolstoyan summary’, as one of Churchill’s biographers, Ronald Lewin, puts it, was surely ‘Winnie’ at his most
perverse, fuelled perhaps by a little brandy and post-Alamein relief, and masked by cigar smoke – Winnie the soldier
still, defiantly growling from some long-remembered battlefield. He was forgetting, perhaps even conveniently, his
own politician’s part in the bloody fiasco of the Dardanelles and Gallipoli. For just as wars have consequences, so do
battles – which is why they are fought – and likewise the operational plans which determine in large measure where
and how those battles are fought. And the principal assumptions on which plans are made are primarily political, not
military; hence Asquith’s assertion at the CID meeting in August 1911 that ‘the expediency of sending a military force
abroad or of relying on naval means alone is a matter of policy which can only be determined when the occasion
arises by the Government of the day.’ The fact was, however, that the politicians had lost control of military strategy
(and in this, of course, British politicians were not alone), their failure to show effective interest allowing a momentum
to develop in the staff conversations whose outcome then became the strategy because once revealed, during the crisis,
there seemed to be no alternative.

By refusing to recognize what this implied – a decision deferred indefinitely – and instead basing all its plans on the
assumption of simultaneous mobilization with the French and the incorporation of the BEF into the deployment
plans of the French general staff, the War Office failed both the army and the country. Since the War Office was both
a department of state and a military headquarters, this was both a political and a military failure – and, since the
secretary of state for war was a member of the cabinet, ultimately a failure of cabinet government.

However the war began – by German design, by the negligence of statesmen, by the purblindness of generals – there
was nothing inevitable about its course. Churchill said memorably, before the great clash of dreadnoughts at Jutland in
1916, that the Royal Navy – in particular the admiral commanding the Grand Fleet, Sir John Jellicoe – could lose the
war in an afternoon. In August 1914, however, the decisive ground was not the North Sea but the Franco-Belgian
border. And though government and the War Office may have failed them, the men of the BEF, the ‘Old
Contemptibles’, paid the price of honour on that decisive ground, and paid it scarcely flinching – in honour, as they
had been variously exhorted, of the King, the nation, the British army, or the regiment. They fought what they knew
was the good fight because, as Sir John French had told them, ‘Our cause is just.’ And despite the shortcomings in
planning and preparation over the years, the pride and prejudice in the senior echelons as the nation went to war, and
the mistakes by commanders and staff in the first encounter battles, they fought a good fight – because, when all else is
going wrong, that is what professionals did (and do).

These, in the day when heaven was falling,

The hour when earth’s foundations fled,

Followed their mercenary calling

And took their wages and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;

They stood, and earth’s foundations stay;

What God abandoned, these defended,

And saved the sum of things for pay.

Further Reading


Frederick the Great and Berlin

Posted on March 31, 2019 by MSW

Death wields his scythe in every corner of the globe. Cannae, the Somme and Stalingrad claimed him as their own. Hiroshima gave him his busiest single day. Siberia’s gulags provided him with decades of regular employment. Both Genghis Khan and Mao Zedong worked him to the bone for a generation all across Asia. But over the centuries it is to Berlin that he has most often returned.

He was present in its earliest days when waves of Teutons, Huns and Slavs fought each other on the marshy plains. He picked them off one by one along with the Wends, the Slavic people who settled on the sandy riverbank in the seventh century, and who named it Berl after the Polabian word for swamp. He stalked their heathen wilderness as it resisted Holy Roman emperors and later Polish kings, making the Mark Brandenburg – das Land in der Mitte – one of the last parts of Europe to be Christianised.
Year after year Death visited through famine, plague and robber barons who tormented the provincial backwater until it all but drained away into the poor, unproductive soil. He marched alongside the Habsburg and Swedish armies as they scattered disembodied bodies on its muddy streets during the Thirty Years’ War. Over those inauspicious decades, he saw more than half the settlement’s population burnt alive, boiled in oil or simply bound with willow switches and tossed into the river. Thousands were lost to typhoid, their nostrils filled with the stench of their own rotting flesh. By 1638 Berlin had been reduced to only 845 houses, less than half the previous number. Old Gölln was totally destroyed. Death gathered up the broken settlers and abandoned souls, held them as they wept, and heard them cry out in despair for a strong leader.

In 1640 their prayers were answered with the accession of an austere and ambitious despot. Frederick William, a Hohenzollern elector and descendant of the wealthy burgrave of Nuremberg, was determined that Brandenburg-Prussia would never again be devastated by marauding armies. He harnessed its survivors’ fear to transform the devastated borderland. He built massive new fortifications around their hungry hovels and branded Berlin with his Calvinist industry. The city expanded to the south and west, spartan Friedrichstadt rising on stilts and stakes on the boggy ground, with 300 uniform, two-storey houses completed in its first year. Within two decades the neighbourhood boasted 12,000 souls. Along Wilhelmstraße aristocrats and royal ministers like Samuel von Marschall, a descendant of Scottish nobles, sited their palatial manor houses.

In return for growth and stability, the Hohenzollerns demanded total deference to their authority, and the still-traumatised Berliners whispered not a word of complaint. They devoted themselves to duty – without question, with tireless labour – and were forged into a disciplined people at arms.

‘A ruler is of no consideration if he does not have adequate means and forces of his own,’ the Great Elector wrote in his Political Testament. ‘That alone has made me – thank God for it – a force to be reckoned with.’

By the start of the eighteenth century Berlin – now ruled by Frederick William’s fanatic grandson, the ‘Soldier King’ – had grown into a great garrison. It was the capital of Prussia, the state built by an army. Its youth were conscripted, issued with uniforms, marched in step to cutting-edge weaponry factories over the now solid-stone Langebrücke. Eighty per cent of the kingdom’s revenue was spent on its fighting men and armouries. The Soldier King also reformed the civil service along military lines, prescribing the exact duties of public servants with minute precision. A minister who failed to attend a committee meeting lost six months’ pay. If he absented himself a second time, he was discharged from service. Absolute obedience was demanded of every man.

Along pristine, battalion-wide avenues soldiers saluted baton-wielding officers, trooped across cobbled parade grounds, breathed in air which reeked of gunpowder and discipline. Martial music echoed down the orderly lanes, into ranked houses scrubbed and cleaned as if for morning inspection. Every noon on Schlossplatz a bizarre troop of giant Potsdam Grenadiers – recruited or kidnapped from across Europe for their size – drilled for the Soldier King’s pleasure. ‘The most beautiful girl or woman in the world would be a matter of indifference to me but tall soldiers, they are my weakness,’ he told the French ambassador.

He never started a war, but war – and the phobic preparation for it – became the obsession of his dutiful and brutish capital of absolutism.

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The Soldier King’s three sons were to be raised as soldiers, awoken at dawn by cannon fire, trained in the fifty-four movements of the Prussian drill code. The first boy died at his christening when a crown was forced on his oversized head. The second child had life shocked out of him by the roar of guns fired too close to his cradle. The only surviving son was a thin and delicate rebel.

Prince Frederick had enormous blue eyes and a sensitive disposition, to his father’s despair. To toughen him up, the king knocked him about. He beat him for jumping off a bolting horse. He whipped him for wearing gloves in wet weather. One wild winter night, when the wind howled in from Russia and a pitcher of drinking water froze at the dinner table, he ordered him to stand guard outside the palace. The child took to hiding under his mother’s bed.

Young Frederick’s education was strict and unimaginative, focused on mathematics, politics and warfare, bereft of literature and Latin. Why study the ancients, barked the Soldier King, as the Romans had been beaten by the Germanic race?

‘The Prince is to rise at six,’ dictated the king. ‘As soon as he has his slippers on he shall kneel at the bed and say a short prayer to God loud enough for all present to hear. Then speedily and with all dispatch he shall dress and wash himself, be queued and powdered; and getting dressed as well as breakfast – tea, which is to be taken while the valet is making his queue and powdering him – shall be finished and done in a quarter of an hour, that is, by a quarter past six.’

To instil in him love for the military, the Soldier King gave Frederick – at the age of six – a regiment of 131 children to drill. The Crown Prince Cadets were reviewed by the visiting Russian Tsar and the King of England. When he was
Frederick called his uniform his shroud. He craved a world beyond the parade ground yet conformed for fear of unleashing his father’s rages. On clear summer nights he escaped into the palace gardens and lay on his back on the damp grass beneath the stars. Once he spotted the Great Bear and, taking aim with a pistol, fired at the beast in his fury, imagining the shot travelling across the Milky Way to strike its flank.

Frederick began to find other worlds through books. With his tutor’s help he assembled in secret his own Wunderkammer, a rich library almost wholly in French. He sat for hours in his window seat memorising Aristotle, Rabelais and Bossuet. He lingered over a thin folio of courtly lyrics, written three centuries earlier by an unknown hand, and revelled in the literary joys of summer, love and young voices rising in song. He composed poetry as well as copious letters to family and friends. While overlooking the parading officers’ plumes and the Marienkirche, he also penned essays on armed aggression and the state of Europe. Germany was fatally divided into small states, he observed; the Thirty Years’ War had been its weakest moment; Russia was in perpetual chaos; England – though rich and happy – had produced no notable painter, sculptor or musician.

As the Soldier King shamed condemned prisoners by dressing them in French clothes at the gallows, his son dreamt of being a poet in Paris or a troubadour. Young Frederick hid away his love of the arts, marching to drum beats by day, practising the flute in his locked room at night.

At the age of fifteen he was deeply confused and frustrated. His heart burst with desire, his mind sparked with curiosity, yet his life was shaped by violence, rigidity and duty. His first foreign trip fed his hunger. He travelled with his father to Saxony, the wealthiest and most scandalous German state at the time. In Dresden Frederick enjoyed plays, opera and a woman. He became infatuated with the Countess Anna Karolina, who was both a daughter and a lover of their host Augustus the Strong. Augustus – who had no aversion to incest – collected beautiful women much as the Soldier King amassed marching giants. Over the course of his life he sired 355 children.

Augustus could not resist tempting the Soldier King and his love-struck son. During a tour of the palace, a curtain was drawn aside to reveal a waiting, naked courtesan. The Prussian King puffed and fussed and excused himself from the bedroom so Augustus, having observed the Crown Prince’s reaction, offered him the woman – in place of the Countess. Frederick may or may not have accepted the offer, but he did not give up Anna Karolina – at first.

On his return to Berlin Frederick found love of another kind. Hans Hermann von Katte was a young aristocrat, charming and handsome with high forehead and smooth, blond hair tied with a black bow. The two young men became inseparable and, like star-crossed lovers, hatched a plan to flee the barrack room for England. On the eve of their flight Katte stood on the threshold of Frederick’s bedchamber, his foot against the door as if to hold it open, their faces so close that they felt the other’s breath on their cheeks.

A wild white moon rode in the sky that night and the air felt fresh and free. But the young men were betrayed. In his fury the Soldier King imprisoned his son, and forced him to watch his friend beheaded. Death plucked love away and Frederick collapsed into a two-day faint, his soul seared by the trauma, empathy driven from his heart.

Frederick was said to like women only while taking his pleasure, afterwards he despised them. In 1733 he married Elisabeth-Christine of Brunswick-Bevern, a Protestant relative of the Habsburgs. He ‘paid his tribute to Hymen’ and then – with no heir forthcoming – detached himself from his wife, making only a single formal visit to her each year, for coffee.

All his closest confidants were male. After Katte’s execution he embraced his soldier servant Fredersdorf, who would serve him until his death. He befriended a debauched Scot named Keith, an Englishman called Guy Dickens and the flautist Quantz. The Venetian coxcomb Francesco Algarotti was an especial favourite. After his wedding Frederick had written to him, ‘My fate has changed – I await you with impatience – don’t leave me to languish.’ In private the Crown Prince draped himself in an embroidered velvet robe, ruffled his hair like a Gallic dilettante and played his flute for friends with tears in his eyes. None were blind to his need to be noticed, to his appetite for fame.

In a report to London the British ambassador called Frederick’s friends ‘the he-muses’, noting that females were banned from approaching his court. One night the Soldier King swooped on the clubby boys like a black bear, throwing their robes and volumes of romantic poetry onto the fire.

Music became Frederick’s other means of escape, enabling him to hold back the shadows, helping to fill the bitter emptiness in his heart. It also thawed his icy self-control and brought solace from his father’s unpredictable temper. The Soldier King’s disregard for the arts appalled him. Before his birth, court intellectuals had been dubbed ‘dog food’. A jester had been appointed to run the Berlin Academy, which was then closed to save money.

In 1740, when his father died, Frederick set about making Berlin a cockpit of ideas and music. He reopened the
Academy, inviting the French philosopher Maupertuis to be its president. He extended the old Schloss to rival Versailles. He built an Opera House, redesigned the Tiergarten, ejecting its last squatters, and modelled the Gendarmenmarkt on Rome’s Piazza del Popolo, flanked by the graceful French and German cathedrals.

His crowning construction was Sanssouci, an intimate, pink and white rococo pleasure palace above Potsdam’s cascading terraces. He filled its colonnades and gilded halls with books, artefacts, dancers and thinkers. He walked his beloved Italian greyhounds in its stately grounds, seemingly at peace with the world. Every night at 10 p.m. there was a concert in the Round Room. One evening he and Bach made music together, the king giving him a theme and asking for its composition into a fugue in six parts. He invited Voltaire to take up residence in the study.

Voltaire was the master wit of the century. Since childhood Frederick had admired him, claiming to champion his humanist ideals, devouring his plays, novels and essays. The two men became correspondents. Frederick asked him to review his essays and erotic poems (‘The love which joins them heats their kisses,/And leaves them ever closer entwined./Heavenly lust! Ruler of the world!’). He tried to lure him to Berlin for more than a decade. In 1750 his persistence paid off, helped by the offer of an annual salary of 20,000 francs.

In the years before the French Revolution Voltaire believed that only an enlightened monarch could bring social change to Europe. His distrust of democracy, which he saw as propagating the idiocy of the masses, pleased his all-powerful host. Both men considered plebeians to be ‘crows’ that pecked at patrician ‘eagles’, to borrow from Shakespeare’s Coriolanus. The common man needed to be kept in his place. Voltaire invested his political hopes in Frederick, moving to the capital, editing the king’s six-volume Art de la Guerre, dazzling Berlin’s dinner table conversation, debating questions of civil liberties late into the night.

Prussians looked forward to a new, enlightened age. They believed that Frederick was a man of peace, an intellectual, a lover of music and poetry. ‘Peace cannot fail to make art and science flourish’, he assured them. On his grand European tour Boswell wrote that Berlin ‘was the most beautiful city I have seen’.

But the capital was already a place where true identities were hidden behind masks. The young king was determined to use his inheritance ‘to acquire a reputation’, as he put it. His father had bequeathed him both a robust military and a cold, calculating heart. In his most ruthless and creative moment, he marched the country to war.

In those years Germany – ‘the battlefield on which the struggle for mastery of Europe is fought’, according to the philosopher Leibniz – was still a mishmash of more than 300 divided states and principalities. Prussia and Austria were its biggest rivals. When the old Habsburg emperor died leaving no male heir, Frederick spurred Berlin’s metamorphosis from prey to predator.

‘Having, as is well known, interests in Silesia, I propose to take charge of it and keep it for the rightful owner,’ he announced. He took Austria’s wealthiest province in seven weeks, twisting Prussia’s neurotic defensiveness into naked aggression. He seized its mines and wheat fields, abandoned his allies, shocked Europe with his gall.

He learnt the art of warfare on the hoof, leading brazen attacks, earning a reputation as the most fearless commander of the age. Risk-taking made up for his inexperience, as did his care for no one. Frederick was ‘full of fire … quick to pounce and take advantage of foibles … with no heart whatever,’ bemoaned a defeated general. ‘Your Majesty, do you want to take that battery on your own?’ an aide called to him as he led yet another cavalry charge, fighting as if he had nothing to lose.

On sleepless nights before an attack, for over twenty embattled years, Frederick soothed himself by composing poetry and reading Racine.

In 1756 the Austrians – joined by Russia and France – sought revenge and attempted to squash the treacherous upstart. Frederick answered them by seizing fickle Saxony and laying siege to Prague. He was beaten back, retreated to his books, then advanced again to Rossbach near Leipzig, where he inflicted another humiliating defeat on his enemies.

For a year the tide turned against him. Silesia changed hands, a vital convoy of 4,000 supply wagons was captured and Frederick had to borrow money from England (London wanted to keep the Continentals fighting among themselves to check French ambitions in North America). Tens of thousands of his troops were butchered on the battlefields, paying for his cold ambition with their limbs and lives. Advancing Russians terrorised East Prussia, tales of their appalling atrocities preceding them to the capital as they would at the end of the Second World War.

But in 1762 the Russian Tsarina died and – in what became known as a Miracle of the House of Brandenburg – her successor, mad Peter III, ordered his troops to change sides and put themselves under Frederick’s command. The Austrian alliance collapsed. The Habsburgs would never regain their lost territories. France surrendered the Rhineland to Frederick and Quebec to the British. Prussia, alone on the Continent, emerged victorious. As Voltaire wrote, the audacious Berliner changed the destiny of Europe.
On horseback Frederick circled the old walls, reluctant to enter the city, mortified by its ruin again. He skirted the deserted cattle market – once Berlin’s Tyburn and ‘devil’s pleasure park’, soon to be renamed Alexanderplatz after the Tsar’s grandson – and the walled gardens of Friedrichstadt. Along its wrecked streets he found only wretched orphans and gutted buildings. In the broad Achteck parade ground at the Potsdam Gate – where Potsdamer Platz would rise one day – a lone, pony-tailed, temple-shaved fire juggler spat plumes of flame into the air and begged for coins. ‘More fire, my lord?’ he called through blackened hands on seeing the king. ‘Do you want more fire?’

Frederick spiralled around the Fischerkiez’s broken boats and trampled gardens, by his dark Court Opera and the baroque Zeughaus artillery armory, with its stone busts of agonised warriors, and into the Schloss courtyard, hardly lifting his head. War was ‘a cruel thing’, he wrote by candlelight in the cursed and battered palace. ‘Nobody who has not seen it with his own eyes can have any idea of it. I believe now that the only happy people on earth are those who love nobody.’

But what are the tears of heart-sick kings and widows if the state has been saved? he then asked in his essay Discours sur la Guerre. Frederick set about rebuilding his capital and nation. He gave 35,000 army horses to peasant farmers. He enticed skilled refugees to settle in the restored neighbourhoods. He commissioned new buildings with straight lines and in pure tones to emphasise order, precision and strength. To feed the growing population he encouraged the cultivation of potatoes, ordering that selected fields be planted with them, and sentries stationed around the perimeter. Word was spread that the potatoes were for the king’s table only, but the guards were told to ‘look through their fingers’ and not apprehend trespassers. With their hard-earned instinct for survival, his hungry, plebeian ‘crows’ stole into the fields, unearthed the royal tubers and replanted them on their own land.

Finally in league with Russia, Frederick resumed making war, pushing his territory beyond Silesia into Poland, eating its undefended provinces ‘like an artichoke, leaf by leaf’. By 1786 he linked Prussia’s scattered, conquered parts together into a unified state.

At the end of his life, with his tattered uniform patched and stained by snuff, Old Fritz was feared more than loved. Neither thunderstorm nor hailstorm was said to be as terrifying as the ‘honour’ of the king’s visit. He was isolated, alone and friendless, and no longer bothered with the pretence of humanism. Yet in their dread of disorder, in their fear of ever again being sucked into the vortex, Berliners allowed him – as other leaders before and after him – to direct and dominate their lives.

In 1806 – two decades after Frederick’s death – Napoleon captured Prussia’s capital, having destroyed its army at Jena and Auerstedt. Astride his white charger, the new emperor rode through the Brandenburg Gate, glowering from under his hat at the defeated Berliners. At the Garrison Church, he stood beside Frederick’s tomb. ‘Hats off, gentlemen,’ Napoleon told his fellow officers. ‘If he were still alive, we would not be here.’

The French Revolution had shattered the old hierarchical ways. The Ancien Régime had collapsed and its King Louis XVI had been executed. In most of Europe and America, citizens had rejected authoritarianism and put their faith in reason and progress.

But not in Berlin. German obedience – as well as faith in absolutism – had been fixed by the trauma of the Thirty Years’ War and by the egotistical Hohenzollerns. For all his learning and debates with Voltaire, and his lip-service to radical ideas, Frederick had isolated his country from the full flowering of the Enlightenment.

Frederick had created Prussia by binding together the disconnected Hohenzollern lands. As Napoleon’s troops stripped his palaces of their wealth, carrying away sculptures, paintings and a folio of medieval songs, passers-by heard the airs of a flute echo over Schlossplatz. Berliners remembered the lost king’s music and – humiliated by the French occupation – grew nostalgic for the old certainties. Then, instead of embracing tolerance and universal brotherhood, they filled the vacuum in their lives with nationalism. Frederick wrote:

Tadelt nie die Taten der Soldaten,

Leuten, die da sterben sollen,

Sollt ihr geben was sie wollen,

Lass sie trinken, lasst sie küssen,

Denn wer weiß, wie bald sie sterben müssen.

Never criticise the acts of soldiers,

Those men who are destined to die,
Give them all that they wish,

Let them drink, let them kiss,

For who knows how soon they must die.
Initial Border and Railway Security Operations in the West and the Occupation of Luxembourg
At the start of the war, the German General Staff believed that the French—possibly even before war was declared—would attempt to disturb German mobilization and deployment by systematically blasting railway bridges and tunnels, by initiating air attacks against railway buildings and trains (especially those travelling across the Rhine bridges), and by conducting surprise dashes using standing or quickly mobilized troops, especially cavalry. A coup de main against the defensive works on Metz’s western front near the frontier and Fort Kaiser Wilhelm II did not seem out of the question. It would be the task of German troops assigned to border and railway security to ward off such attempts. Furthermore, these troops were tasked with securing the areas required for the deployment of the Field Army, with obscuring their own measures, and, if possible, with gaining a glimpse of the enemy’s activities. It was therefore very important, in the event of war, that German border and railway security personnel be put into action in time and with sufficient strength.

At the instigation of the Prussian War Minister, and acting under the authority of special provisions initiated during times of heightened political tension, on 28 July, Chancellor von Bethmann Hollweg increased railway supervision in frontier districts, as well as for railway employees under the jurisdiction of the Berlin Railway Division Authority (Eisenbahndirektion Berlin). This was the first protective measure taken at the behest of the central military authority. On the same day, the Ministry of War ordered the recall of those troops who were absent from their garrisons, who in the event of mobilization were to be “immediately” or quickly ready to march, for purposes of border security and for certain special tasks. Also, members of the public safety service were to guard the large wireless stations. Late on the night of 29 July, orders were sent out to recall to their garrisons all troops on manoeuvres and training grounds and to protect the air corps establishments as well as important structures along railway lines and waterways in the frontier districts. During the night of 29–30 July, the construction of armed positions for frontier defence was ordered as long as they were on German soil.

The state of “Sentinel Duty,” ordered on 30 July for the German Navy, required that the land army only put into readiness the active troops destined for the protection of the islands of Borkum, Pellworm, and Sylt—a total of five and a quarter infantry battalions, a company of engineers, and a foot artillery battalion including artillery equipment, ammunition, and provisions.

The deployment of frontier protection, which XVI Corps Headquarters intended to begin on 31 July, was abandoned after the Minister of War objected.

Only when the “State of Imminent Danger of War” was declared on 31 July at 13:00 did all measures prepared in peacetime for the military protection of frontiers, railways, and the coast come into force. Passenger and mail traffic across the frontiers was placed under more strict control, international telephone traffic and non-official wireless dispatches were prohibited, and public freight traffic in the border districts was suspended. The troop mobilization, however, was not connected with these moves. No reserves were called up, nor were units conveyed from the interior of the Empire to its borders; instead, the men of the frontier corps—who were still on their peacetime footing—took over protection of the frontiers as well as that of the railways within the jurisdiction of their corps.

Simultaneously with the Decree of Mobilization for the Army and Navy, promulgated on 1 August at 17:00 hours, the Landsturm was called out in the jurisdictions of fifteen separate corps (I, II, V, VI, VIII, IX, X, XI, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XX, XXI, and Bavarian II Corps).

At first, protection of the western deployment fell to the frontier corps (VIII, XVI, XXI, XV, and XIV Corps), according to the instructions for border and railway security issued by the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army in peacetime. As hostilities were to commence only upon orders of the OHL, even patrols, small detachments, and aircraft were strictly prohibited from crossing the frontier into French or Belgian territory. This prohibition, however, would become immediately invalid if the enemy entered or overflew German territory. Notwithstanding these peacetime regulations, on the night of 1–2 August, the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army enjoined the general commanding XVI Corps again, in a personal telephone call, to maintain the strictest restraint among his border guards. He stressed that any trespassing on enemy territory was to be strictly avoided, as were any hostilities. On the afternoon of 2 August the same instruction was telegraphed again to the headquarters of the five corps on the Western frontier. Only the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg was exempt from these rules, since it was in a customs union with Germany. Luxembourg was scheduled to be occupied immediately upon the Decree of Mobilization and was to be included in the deployment territory; this was in order to take possession of its important railways.

In general, the borders of the corps districts were treated as the lateral operational boundaries for the areas to be defended. After entry into Luxembourg, the southern frontier of that country was to be divided between VIII and XVI Corps. The commanding generals were to direct the troops and formations within their own jurisdictions for the execution of their tasks. The 16th Infantry Division of VIII Corps was assigned to occupy Luxembourg. Its troops, which had been hurriedly put into readiness, were to turn out immediately after reporting themselves ready to march. Otherwise, during the “State of Imminent Danger of War,” VIII Corps’ border security operations in the relatively safe area between Kaldenkirchen and Echternach were to be carried out only by the Gendarme, customs officers, forestry officers, and road police, and, after mobilization, by Landsturm forces. On the Swiss border, too, the Landsturm was viewed as able to provide satisfactory security. However, in the section from Luxembourg to the Swiss frontier, active troops were stationed from the very start. Protection of the railways in the areas of XVI, XV, XXI, and Bavarian II
Corps (Palatinate) was likewise assigned to active troops, while in the jurisdictions of VIII and XIV Corps this was left mostly to Landsturm troops.

The special difficulties attached to border and railway protection lay, first, in the speed at which the troops assigned to it had to ready themselves, and, second, in the steady change of troops and responsible commanding authorities during the first days of deployment. It was imperative that such protection come into force as rapidly as possible, on all points that could be threatened in any way. The first active troops to be employed had to be those stationed in the nearest peacetime garrisons. They were especially fit for this duty on account of their knowledge of local conditions. Of course, these troops were not already on a war footing and had to turn out before mobilization was completed. Some of them were not even stationed within the jurisdictions of the headquarters to which they had been assigned under the war organization.

Border security arrangements were executed in part on 31 July, the remainder on 1 August, without any disturbances and without serious contact with the enemy. Beyond the frontier, French guards and frontier sentries were identified at many points. At first, active patrols were made only in the Vosges and at the Burgundian Gate, where some frontier violations did occur in spite of the strict prohibitions that had been issued. These were the result of the understandable but ill-timed impulsiveness of eager patrol leaders. Against these, it is true, stood a considerably greater number of French frontier violations. Only after Germany declared war against France on 3 August at 18:00 was cross-border reconnaissance permitted.

In the meantime, 16th Infantry Division had already occupied the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. The completion of this mission, however, was at first delayed by the Chief of the General Staff of the Army, who telephoned on 1 August at 18:40 to prohibit the crossing of the Luxembourg border on the orders of the Kaiser. According to its deployment instructions, 16th Infantry Division was to have entered Luxembourg immediately on receipt of the mobilization order, but it was only permitted to do so after a new instruction was issued at 12:45 the next morning. Elements of Infantry Regiments 29 and 69, which had assembled at different points, although their units were not yet fully mobilized, rushed forward by armoured train, in railway cars and automobiles, and on bicycles, to secure the railway lines Wasserbillig–Luxembourg and Duedelingen–Luxembourg–Dierkirch–Wallendorf. Luxembourg City was occupied on the afternoon of 2 August. The bulk of 16th Infantry Division under Generalleutnant Fuchs followed at 07:00 the next morning from Zewen via Wasserbillig–Manternach, without waiting for mobilization to be completed. The deployment occurred without incident. The Luxembourg government limited itself to a diplomatic protest and behaved with restraint. The population was quiet, sometimes even obliging. The occupied railway lines were left fully intact and fit for operational use. There was no contact with the French. On 3 August the main forces of 16th Infantry Division remained on the German side of the Alzette River, while smaller forces entrenched on the far bank. In spite of a number of reports to the contrary, it was ascertained that the French had not crossed the Luxembourg frontier.

On the evening of 3 August, XVIII Corps’ 50th composite Infantry Brigade, composed of hurriedly mobilized troops, was conveyed by rail to Köningsmachern and Sierck. These troops arrived as reinforcements in the area of Bettembourg. There they took over the tasks of border and railway security in the southernmost part of Luxembourg. The 15th and 16th Cavalry Brigades, seconded to 16th Infantry Division, were pushed forward to Dippach and Pontpierre. Only once beyond the French and Belgian borders did they come into contact with enemy frontier guards; repeated clashes followed between reconnaissance parties over the ensuing days.

Around the fortresses of Thionville and Metz, border security was assigned to XVI Corps Headquarters. Besides the measures taken to increase the preparedness and readiness for action of firing positions in the outer works and to secure the connections between them, headquarters pushed Infantry Regiment 144—reinforced by some artillery and cavalry—into the area of Rorabach on 31 July. From here the regiment marched across the border on 4 August to reconnoitre, occupying Briey the following day after a light skirmish with French frontier guard detachments. A more serious clash occurred on 8 August, when a company standing near Valleroy repulsed an attack by superior forces (French 16th Chasseurs) from Labry. Parts of the regiment, together with a battery, made a dash for Labry and Conflans in the afternoon, returning to their positions in the evening with a number of prisoners.

As in Luxembourg, German border protection forces in the Rhineland and Lorraine received welcome reinforcements on the evening of 3 August. This relief came with the arrival of hurriedly transported mixed infantry brigades consisting generally of six battalions, one squadron, and three batteries each. These units had already been made ready to march in their peacetime garrisons on the first day of mobilization and had to have their remaining complements sent after them into the field. As a rule, they were employed in the future deployment areas of those corps to which they belonged according to the wartime organization and were subordinated to the commanding generals of the frontier corps until the arrival of their own corps headquarters.

On 3 August the composite 53rd Infantry Brigade (XIII Corps) took over protection of the right wing of the section of XVI Corps north of Thionville while XXI Corps’ 42nd Infantry Division took up border security duty alone in the 75-kilometre-wide gap between Metz and the Vosges. The 42nd was given significant relief by bringing forward three mixed Bavarian infantry brigades. Of these, the 11th marched into the area of Rémilly, the 7th to Moerchingen, and the 3rd to Saarburg. From then on, 42nd Infantry Division could limit its own patrols to the section of Dieuze. The enemy was not very active along this entire front. After 7 August the German infantry guards were pushed forward over the
border, with the left wing (Bavarian 3rd Infantry Brigade), in connection with the movements of the GHQ Cavalry—which was making light contact in places with a weak enemy—advancing to the line Blâmont–Cirey.

In addition to the gains made in border skirmishes in Luxembourg and Lorraine, beginning on 3 August early assistance was provided by the assembly of the cavalry, with I Cavalry Corps (Senior Cavalry Commander 1) arriving on the Eifel, IV Cavalry Corps (Senior Cavalry Commander 4) in the southern part of Luxembourg and north of Thionville, and III Cavalry Corps (Senior Cavalry Commander 3) in Lorraine. In addition to its primary task of gathering strategic intelligence, along with the Jägerbattalions allocated to it, the cavalry was to concurrently provide security along the borders and lines of communication.

From the beginning, it was anticipated that the planned German deployment in the Vosges and the Burgundian Gate would be eventful and difficult. In XV Corps sector—encompassing the northern part of the Vosges from Donon to the Rheinkopf south of Schlucht Pass—several infantry regiments and Jägerbattalions, reinforced by artillery and cavalry, guarded the border; in XIV Corps’ sector (adjacent to the Swiss border) the task fell under the unified leadership of the commander of the composite 58th Infantry Brigade. After the first two days in which border violations described above occurred, nothing of importance happened along this front. The situation determined by the reconnaissance carried out after the start of the war was that the entire frontier was safeguarded by chains of French posts behind which larger detachments were situated in reinforced positions. From 5 August onwards, however, combat patrols were sent out in many areas owing to the enemy’s increased activity. Of a more serious nature was an engagement at the Schlucht Pass and at the Hohneck on 5 August. Strong French detachments advancing from Gérardmer with machine guns and artillery pushed the German pickets back, and the Germans blew the tunnel through the Schlucht Pass. The enemy did not press after them any further. The activity of the French border guards increased over the following days along the Vosges Front and was closely connected to the first large military action on which the enemy command had decided: the strike at Mulhouse.

Battle of Mühlberg (Saxony), (24 April 1547)

Posted on March 22, 2019 by MSW
Charles V as victor at the battle of Mühlberg, 1547, by Titian. The armour shown in the portrait is preserved in the royal palace in Madrid.

The first battle took place on April 24, 1547, at Mühlberg (near Leipzig). By this time, imperial forces, under Don Fernando Alvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba (1508-82), were well prepared, whereas the dilatory league had not gathered all of its strength; in fact, it had even lost some forces that defected to the Holy Roman Empire. Thirty-five hundred imperial troops allied with a papal army of 10,000-13,500 troops engaged 9,000 German Protestants under John Frederick (1503-54), elector of Saxony, and Philip (1504-67), landgrave of Hesse. The result was disaster for the forces of the league, which suffered heavy losses, compared to only 50 casualties on the Catholic side. Both Protestant commanders, John Frederick and Philip, were taken prisoner, and the war abruptly ended.
BATTLE OF MÜHLBERG, 1547

A1: Cosolete This veteran pikeman of the Duke of Alba’s army, which has just crossed the Elbe river, wears an open-faced burgonet helmet and half-armour – a Nuremberg cuirass, without tassets (though these may be carried with the baggage train). The Spanish monarchy purchased armour from many sources, and most of the pieces in the Royal Collection in Madrid were made by German craftsmen. The short breeches (in the English term, ‘upper stocks’) show the influence of the Landsknecht troops alongside whom the Spaniards fought in Charles V’s Imperial army; made in one piece with, or laced to, the hose (‘nether stocks’), these are taken from a painting of 1536-44 now in Avila Cathedral. The sword is a typical 16th-century model, with protective ‘gavilanes’ at the hilt.

A2: Pica seca This young man is on his first campaign, and has only the minimum essentials: his pike, a narrow-brimmed pot helmet, and (hidden here) a sword, which may be an old-fashioned family heirloom. This helmet shape is the true ‘Spanish morion’. His simple homespun clothes are based on contemporary paintings showing poor men and servants; the short cloak was sometimes hooded. A2a, 2b: Two more examples of contemporary helmets, as widely worn throughout European armies – transitional forms that might equally be termed ‘cabasset’ or ‘morion’.

A3: Arquebusier The quality of his clothing shows him to be a man of some substance. He wears one of the styles of bonnet seen in art of the period. His expensive leather jacket, slashed and scalloped, bears a large red Burgundy Cross sewn to the breast as a sign of his nationality. He too wears German-inspired hose, made in one piece but appearing as ‘upper’ and ‘nether stocks’. The powder, priming powder and bullets for his arquebus are carried in a horn, a small flask and a bag. Matchcord might be carried ready for use wrapped around the arm or waist, but since it was hygroscopic it was important to keep spare lengths dry inside the clothes or under the hat. Period illustrations of ‘snapsacks’ or haversacks are very rare, but the soldiers must have had somewhere to carry food and small effects – particularly the arquebusiers’ bullet-moulds, flint-and-steel and tinder boxes. The artist Vermeyen, who accompanied the 1535 Tunis expedition, shows nearly every pikeman carrying what seems to be a snapsack, but one soldier is clearly drinking from his, so perhaps they are waterskins?

(Weapons and armour: Spanish Army Museum; Wallace Collection; Imperial Arsenal, Vienna. Clothing: La infantería en torno al)
The Treaty of Crépy with France in 1544, followed in 1546 by a long truce with the sultan, left Charles V free to deal with more domestic matters. But his rivals acted first, and in July 1546 they moved against him from two directions. A large army under Philip of Hesse and John Frederic, Elector of Saxony, marched upon Charles from the north, while another approached from the south-west. Charles could well have been in grave peril had it not been for two unexpected factors. First, his enemies preferred to negotiate rather than attack, which gave the emperor ample time to raise troops. Second, and more surprisingly to the Schmalkaldics, one of their most important members, Maurice the Margrave of Misnia, defected to the imperial side. Maurice was Elector John Frederic’s cousin, and so opportunistic was his move that he quickly overran much of the elector’s territory. Unsurprisingly, John Frederic then chose to march north with the bulk of the Protestant army to evict Maurice, leaving Philip of Hesse isolated. Charles V struck eagerly and successfully at this latter, weaker target while his foes were so conveniently divided.

Meanwhile, John Frederic took his revenge on his cousin Maurice the Margrave of Misnia and ejected him from Thuringia. He then added to his triumph by annihilating an army of seven thousand men sent by Charles and put under the command of Albert of Hohenzollern-Kulmbach. Charles, however, advanced at the head of some thirty thousand men to confront him, and as John Frederic only commanded half that number he withdrew across the River Elbe at Mühlberg and broke down its bridge. John Frederic was desperately short of allies because Philip of Hesse had begun futile negotiations with Charles, the evident intention being to save his own domains.

The Schmalkaldic War

The Schmalkaldic War began in 1546. Insisting that he was acting against disobedient vassals, rather than Protestants, Charles used Spanish troops under the Duke of Alba to defeat the leading German Protestant, Elector John Frederick of Saxony, at Mühlberg on 24 April 1547. The Elector was captured, and, two months later, the other Protestant leader in opposition, Philip of Hesse, who had been defeated first, surrendered. Victory in Germany helped Charles strengthen Habsburg authority in Bohemia where some of the nobility had looked to the Schmalkaldic powers who had prepared to invade the kingdom. Charles had been helped by the neutrality of France (a consequence of the secret terms of the Peace of Crépy) and by the support of Protestant princes who hoped to benefit personally: Duke Maurice of Saxony (a different branch of the dynasty) and Margrave Albert Alcibiades of Brandenburg-Kulmbach. The victory reflected the combination of military and political factors characteristic of the conflict in the period, not only of the Wars of Religion, but also of the Italian Wars. Charles exploited his victory to dictate peace terms at the ‘Armed Diet’ of Augsburg. The Electorate of Saxony was transferred to Maurice in 1550.

Charles V’s defeat of the Schmalkaldic League at the Battle of Mühlberg was both the first major battle fought by Spanish troops in northern Europe and the greatest success for the Habsburg military system after Pavia. It was also a victory that owed as much to political as to military circumstances. A contest between the Emperor and the alliance of Lutheran princes and cities had been in the offing since the creation of the League in 1531, but it was only in 1546 that, having recently made peace with Francis I, Charles decided to resolve the religious division in the Holy Roman Empire by force. He proceeded carefully to win over certain Protestant princes and to obtain assistance from the
German Catholics.

In the summer of 1546, while he was assembling his army, the League, led by the Elector John Frederick of Saxony, moved first and opened hostilities on 14 August. Charles's preparations were not complete, but the League's attempts to invade the Austrian duchies were thwarted by a skillful defensive campaign conducted by the Duke of Alba along the Danube in the autumn of 1546. At the same time Duke Maurice of Saxony, who had been won over by the Emperor, invaded the Electorate and forced John Frederick to retreat.

**BATTLE OF MÜHLBERG**

By early 1547 Charles had both completed the assembly of an army of 30,000 Spanish, Italian, Netherlandish and German troops and forced a number of League members into neutrality. In April he advanced into Saxony, catching John Frederick, who had remained curiously indecisive during the first months of 1547, with his army dispersed. Having only some 15,000 men with him the Elector was retiring on his capital, Wittenberg, when Charles's scouts encountered his outposts near Mühlberg on the Elbe.

Charles had collected a sizeable number of boats on his side of the Elbe with which to make a pontoon bridge, but a local peasant, whose farm had been destroyed by the elector’s men during their withdrawal, happily disclosed to Charles's army the location of a ford. The crossing began on the very dark and foggy morning of 24 April 1547. The river was wide, and thus it was that an astounded Schmalkaldic army suddenly felt bullets whizzing round them. Their experience of firearms was with arquebuses and pistols, which they knew were of too short a range to reach across the Elbe. But the Duke of Alba, Charles V’s general, was employing a new, heavier, long-range version, which was fired from a forked rest and had been given the name of ‘musket’.

The tough Spanish infantry led the imperial army during its crossing. The musketeers felled the occupants of boats on the far shore and the vessels were then taken by other Spaniards who clambered on board with knives between their teeth. They were followed over the ford by the light cavalry, and then came Charles himself at the head of his reiters, a scene immortalised for ever in a painting by Titian. The vanguard hastily secured the far bank and began to construct the planned bridge of boats to facilitate the progress of the rest of the imperial army.

John Frederic, Elector of Saxony, was taken completely by surprise. His camp lay three miles beyond the river, and he had eaten a leisurely and hearty breakfast before learning of the disaster. Without even considering a counterattack, he gave orders for his army to retreat to the safety of Wittenberg. Once Charles realised what had happened, he sent the Duke of Alba on ahead to harass his opponent’s withdrawal. The Protestant army had gone scarcely three miles when its rear was attacked. Sensing that the heavy reiters would soon be upon him too, John Frederic resolved to stand and fight. This gave Charles the opportunity to draw up his army in battle array, and he wasted no time in sending in squadrons of reiters and other cavalry units against the elector’s more vulnerable mounted men on the wings. On the imperial right, Maurice the Margrave of Misnia used old-fashioned mounted arquebusiers, who softened up the Saxons sufficiently for a triumphant charge. Other imperial mounted troops completed an encirclement by bursting out of cover on the road to Wittenberg. Great was the slaughter. The elector, having defended himself with the sword, was captured and taken before his emperor. He was eventually imprisoned for life, and all his domains, together with the title of Elector of Saxony, went to Maurice the Margrave of Misnia. Thus did the Battle of Mühlberg put an end to the Schmalkaldic League through a combination of cavalry and infantry tactics, old and new. Philip of Hesse, who might have saved John Frederic, paid for his inaction by a similar sentence of imprisonment.

**Aftermath**

Yet, strange to relate, there was one more act to play: the newly promoted Maurice, Elector of Saxony, reasserted his Protestant sensibilities and made an alliance with France against Emperor Charles V. However, his delusions of grandeur came to an abrupt end at Sievershausen in 1553. The battle included a skirmish between rival squadrons of reiters, and an anonymous bullet from a wheel-lock pistol felled the erstwhile Margrave of Misnia. He died two days later. Charles’s success in reducing the number of his opponents while concentrating his own forces left John Frederick practically isolated. Charles was thus able to deploy a massive numerical superiority at the decisive moment while the bold seizure of the crossing of the Elbe by the Spanish infantry gave him the crucial tactical advantage.
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