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Source Exploration: Helmuth von Moltke the Elder's *Memorandum on the Effect of Improvements in Firearms on Battlefield Tactics* (1861)

Summary

Upon his advancement to the rank of colonel in 1851, he became personal aide to Prince Frederick, who, in 1888 became Emperor Frederick III. Prussian leadership promoted Moltke to Chief of General Staff in 1857, where he immediately began applying his fascination with organization and strategy to the Prussian army. The position was not the highest rank in the military yet required him to use the management skills that separated him from other officers. Moltke rose to general in 1856 and reached the highest rank, Field Marshal, in 1871 following the unification of Germany and reorganization of the military. He died in 1891.

The *Memorandum on the Effect of Improvements in Firearms and Tactics* of 1861 best illustrates the kind of intense planning that Moltke promoted as Chief of Staff. Written for his fellow generals, the memo discusses the changes in military strategy and organization that would ultimately drive Prussian successes under his leadership. In the document, Moltke discusses the implications of the new, advanced weaponry that Prussian soldiers wielded. He emphasized that the rifled "needle guns" gave Prussian soldiers and artillery far more accuracy than rival armies. Moltke stresses that speed and mobility will be the Prussians' greatest asset, as the accurate artillery enabled quick destruction of enemy lines and advancing infantry would easily handle the shattered enemy formations.<sup>1</sup> The coupling of German technology and Moltke's tactics made the Prussian military nearly unstoppable, winning three wars underneath Moltke's administration. After this record of success, his writings became canonical in military studies.

Google Ngrams

I entered "Helmuth von Moltke" into Google Ngrams, which showed the frequency of mentions of his name from 1840-1970. Moltke is mentioned most following his death in 1891 in all languages. From 1891-1910, his popularity is at his highest, reflecting the post-mortem respect he earned from overseeing several victorious wars. There are very few mentions of him before his death by English sources but German and French sources actually see a small spike during the 1870s. Moltke's was remembered as a very eloquent writer. Via a Google Books

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<sup>1</sup> von Moltke, Helmuth. "Memorandum on the Effect of Improvements in Firearms on Battlefield Tactics." (1861). German History in Documents and Image. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=352](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=352).

search, I found that his letters from his travels in Turkey were translated to French by Alfred Kauffmann Marchand in *Lettres du Marechal de Moltke sur l'Orient*, published in 1872.<sup>2</sup>

After 1910, the Ngram graph showed various spikes, but after further investigation, I determined that the sources mentioned his nephew, who had the same name. Known as Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, the nephew became Chief of Staff of the German General Staff from 1906-1914, stepped down following the failure of the Schlieffen plan during World War I.

### Wetzel

In historian David Wetzel's book, *A Duel of Giants*, the author portrays Moltke as a catalyst of the Franco-Prussian War. According to Wetzel, Moltke and his army were "still basking in the throes of the victory it had won over Austria...were only too impatient for a fresh trial of strength on the Rhine."<sup>3</sup> During the build-up to the war, Moltke became a proponent of attacking France decisively while Bismarck elected to play politics and attempt to lure the French into the conflict. Bismarck met with Moltke for a dinner the night of July 12, 1970, just 7 days before the beginning of the war. Moltke "looked ten years younger" with the chance for war growing.<sup>4</sup>

Wetzel's book on the Franco-Prussian war painted Moltke as a warmonger almost to a fault. However, Moltke still appeared a military genius, as Bismarck elected to include the general on many of the maneuvers that occurred to draw France into a war. Moltke cared little for the politics of the situation yet understood that he stood to gain an advantage should Bismarck's ploys work. I found this source in the UCSB Library.

### Howard

Michael Howard's comprehensive review of the Franco-Prussian War details the preparations and strategies of Helmuth von Moltke. Moltke's organizational skills were cited as the best advantage over the French, as their plans weren't made "until the very eve of the war."<sup>5</sup> Moltke's role became particularly important, as "the slightest French success will determine all the states of South Germany to march to you."<sup>6</sup> Should the initial stages of the war yield no success, the Prussians and North German Confederation would be without the aid of Southern Germany, ending Moltke's numerical superiority over the French.

Howard's book also explores the various tactics that Moltke discusses in the *Memorandum on the Effect of Improvement of Firearms on Battlefield Tactics*. Use of flexible formations, defensive tactics, and accurate, devastating artillery provided the Prussians with a

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<sup>2</sup> Moltke, Helmuth. In *Lettres du Marechal de Moltke sur L'Orient*, edited by Alfred K. Marchand, 2nd ed. translated by Alfred k. Marchand. Paris: Librairie Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1871. Gallica. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k373601b/f1.item.zoom>.

<sup>3</sup> Wetzel, David. *A Duel of Giants*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. P 114.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 141

<sup>5</sup> Howard, Michael. *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962. P. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P. 45.

distinct advantage over the French.<sup>7</sup> Although the *Memorandum* was written nine years prior to the Franco-Prussian conflict, Moltke gained overwhelming evidence that his belief in the capability of the “needle-guns,” or rifled long-bore rifles, was correct during the easy victory over the Austrians in 1866.<sup>8</sup>

Once the war started, Howard emphasizes that Moltke had everything he needed to defeat the French. Moltke adopted advanced technology and devoted the pre-war period to comprehensive planning of a war with France. On the other hand, France did not change with the times, and the “twentieth century was to be well advanced before they did.”<sup>9</sup> Howard illustrates Moltke as a military genius who devoted his life to winning wars. This UCSB owned book is an excellent source on Moltke’s importance to military history.

## **GHI**

The *Memorandum on the Effect of Improvement of Firearms on Battlefield Tactics* was published in Germany in a multi-volume compilation named *Militärische Werke (1896-1912)*.<sup>10</sup> Mary Herms translated these works to English; she released many of his documents in her book, *Field-Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke as a Correspondent* (1893). Mary Herms’ work is available at the UCLA library.

Other modern military historians have published various memorandums and correspondence of Moltke wrote. **Quintin Barry’s** *The Road to Königsgrätz* describes the build-up to the war and features the Moltke’s *Memorandum* at the end of his book as an explanatory primary source. This book is online in EBook form.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. P. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Pg 7.

<sup>10</sup> Von Moltke, H. (1897). *Militärische werke* (Vol. 1). Berlin, Germany: E.S. Mittler und Sohn.