Conquering the Unknowable: Romanticism's Influence on Helmuth von Moltke

A Monograph

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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
2017

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE *(DD-MM-YYYY)* 03-04-2017	**2. REPORT TYPE** Master's Thesis	**3. DATES COVERED** *(From - To)* JUN 2016 – MAY 2017

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE
Conquering the Unknowable: Romanticism's Influence on Helmuth von Moltke

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER

5b. GRANT NUMBER

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER

6. AUTHOR(S)
Major Karin Gresham

5d. PROJECT NUMBER

5e. TASK NUMBER

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD
Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301

8. PERFORMING ORG REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)
Advanced Military Studies Program.

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for Public Release; Distribution is Unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

As the general officer credited with putting Carl von Clausewitz's theories into practice, Helmuth von Moltke had a profound influence on modern warfare, most notably revolutionizing the role of the general staff and, in the face of much criticism, unapologetically advocating for the empowerment of subordinate leaders. His influence remains present in modern command structures and mission command thinking. Although they are typically associated with the intellectual approaches of emergent military science, the foundations of Moltke's most influential practices were rooted in Romantic philosophy. To be sure, his belief in human reason's ability to deconstruct and synthesize complex information reflects Immanuel Kant's theories on the human mind's categorization and synthesis of particulars, which Kant termed synthetic judgments *a priori*. Moltke also betrayed an affinity for Romantic interpretations of sublimity, humanism, and autonomy that in the end dominated his theories and practices. Moltke, one of the greatest modern military theorists and practitioners, cannot be correctly evaluated without consideration of all the influences on his thinking and practice

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			**17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT**	**18. NUMBER OF PAGES**	**19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON** Major Karin Gresham
a. REPORT	**b. ABSTRACT**	**c. THIS PAGE**			**19b. PHONE NUMBER** *(include area code)*
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	40	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std. Z39.18

Monograph Approval Page

Name of Candidate: MAJ Karin R. Gresham

Monograph Title: Conquering the Unknowable: Romanticism's Influence on Helmuth von Moltke

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Abstract

Conquering the Unknowable: Romanticism's Influence on Helmuth von Moltke, by MAJ Karin R. Gresham, United States Army, 40 pages.

As the general officer credited with putting Carl von Clausewitz's theories into practice, Helmuth von Moltke had a profound influence on modern warfare, most notably revolutionizing the role of the general staff and, in the face of much criticism, unapologetically advocating for the empowerment of subordinate leaders. His influence remains present in modern command structures and mission command thinking. Although they are typically associated with the intellectual approaches of emergent military science, the foundations of Moltke's most influential practices were rooted in Romantic philosophy. To be sure, his belief in human reason's ability to deconstruct and synthesize complex information reflects Immanuel Kant's theories on the human mind's categorization and synthesis of particulars, which Kant termed synthetic judgments *a priori*. Moltke also betrayed an affinity for Romantic interpretations of sublimity, humanism, and autonomy that in the end dominated his theories and practices. Moltke, one of the greatest modern military theorists and practitioners, cannot be correctly evaluated without consideration of all the influences on his thinking and practice.

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Acknowledgement

Throughout this process, I have been blessed with an incredible support structure. None of my writing would be possible without the love and support of my husband and children, Sheldon, Warren, and Clara, for whom I am eternally grateful. My father, Robert Meindl, who has been the best sounding board possible over the last twenty years, is equally worthy of my gratitude. I am also incredibly thankful for my monograph director, Professor Ricardo Herrera, whose support, insights, and candid feedback significantly shaped my argument. Finally, I feel incredibly fortunate to have had the support of my seminar leader, COL Eric Laforest, during this process. This project would not have been possible without the support of these individuals.

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Introduction

Quoting Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*, a grainy voice, one of the few born out of the eighteenth-century captured by Thomas Edison’s amazing contraption, greets the twenty-first century in German through a dusty, long-lost cylinder, the English version of which reads:

> Yet in each soul is born the pleasure
> Of yearning onward, upward and away.
> When o'er our heads, lost in the vaulted azure,
> The lark sends down his flickering lay;
> When over crags and piny highlands
> The poising eagle slowly soars,
> And over plains and lakes and islands
> The crane sails by to other shores.[1]

In this excerpt from *Faust*, the reader expresses the duality of the human experience, here defined by the transcendent yearning of the soul, tethered by the limits of the corporeal body. For Goethe’s hero, the lark, eagle, and crane are enviable, for they can fly close to the heavens in a way that man cannot. Nevertheless, hearing and seeing them births a “pleasure of yearning onward, upward and away” that establishes a relationship. Man, too, can reach great heights.

Hearing the recording, one might imagine the voice belongs to a long-dead intellectual, perhaps a prestigious philosopher. Yet it belongs to Helmuth von Moltke, the great Prussian field marshal, responsible for the military victories that led to German unification, whose own life demonstrated the flight suggested by Goethe’s image. While it may seem strange that a famous military intellectual and field marshal would spend his time on poetry, further analysis reveals a mutually reciprocal relationship between Romantic literature and nineteenth-century Prussian warfare. To be specific, the guiding ideas of German Romanticism had a clear impact on Moltke’s theories on war and campaign development, ideas which in their turn had been influenced, both before and during Moltke’s lifetime, by the practices of war.

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[1] Stephan Puille, “Prince Bismarck and Count Moltke Before the Recording Horn: The Edison Phonograph in Europe, 1889-1890,” National Park Service, trans. Patrick Feaster, 30 January 2012, accessed 2 December 2016, https://www.nps.gov/edis/learn/photosmultimedia/prince-bismarck-and-count-moltke-before-the-recording-horn.htm.

This connection is incredibly important, yet often overlooked, for the humanities are not highly valued by a military tradition that privileges science and rationality as guiding principles. While some international relations studies, such as those developed by Thomas Freedman and Joseph Nye, interrogate elements of society, such as economics, that do impact the nature of war, few recognize the effects of philosophy and literature. Even fewer recognize the impact of literature on military tactics and operations. For instance, scholars widely recognize the impact of Romantic philosophy on the theories of Carl von Clausewitz, but few identify how this impact works its way into the Prussian military tradition. To clarify this oversight, a critical examination is required of the relationship between Romantic philosophy and the Prussian Army. The impact of this relationship on Moltke’s writing and leadership, specifically during the campaign of 1866, then becomes worthy of examination.

An examination of Romantic philosophy and war reveals a reciprocal relationship between the two, both in theory and action. War became a space in which influential scholars like Johann von Goethe and Immanuel Kant explored ideas like morality and freedom. To be sure, European warfare provided a theater in which these two notions were propelled to their highest and lowest limits. In practice, they influenced German military intellectuals and reinforced preexisting Prussian military traditions, such as the cult of the offensive. Ultimately, these factors combined laid the groundwork for Prussian unification of Germany, which was speared-headed by the armies under the generalship of Helmuth von Moltke.

The Romantic tradition had a profound influence on Helmuth von Moltke, a man famous for his intellectual footprint as well as his leadership in the field. A thorough examination of Moltke’s early life, scholarly influences, and creative writing illustrates the extent to which Romantic philosophy influenced him personally and professionally. Ultimately, it reveals that his early influences and artistic merits reflected core beliefs and values that transferred into his army field guidance and axioms.

Romantic thought influenced Moltke's leadership of the Prussian General Staff up to the campaign of 1866 and during the execution phase of the campaign. Both planning and execution phases betray the influences of Kant and Goethe, and the recurring ideas that resulted from these influences include synthetic judgements *a priori*, the categorical imperative, *Bildung*, and sublimity. Ultimately, these influences aided Moltke's military success, as they imbued in him the value of a keen mind and human agency.

Unfortunately, this study cannot cover the entire extent of Romantic philosophy and its influences on Moltke. Nor does it attempt to evaluate the impact on Moltke of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. In an 1890 interview, Moltke listed "Homer's works, the Bible, and *On War* among the five books that most influenced him."[2] As Moltke was a careful student of Clausewitz, elements of Romantic philosophy no doubt reached him through *On War* as well. Nevertheless, this area has been well canvassed and is large enough that it warrants its own study. Instead, this argument attempts to find traces of precise philosophies in Moltke and his exposure to the corresponding philosophers. Certainly, the following illustration of Romanticism's direct influence on Moltke demonstrates the value of using the humanities as a lens through which to evaluate war.

Kant and Goethe's Foundational Romantic Philosophies and their General Impact on Nineteenth-Century Prussian Military Theory

John Lynn argues that, "It is necessary to read *On War* not as a work that expresses eternal truth about war, but within the intellectual context that generated it. It is a Romantic work, and like the broader intellectual and cultural movement of Romanticism, it cannot be understood apart from the intellectual paradigm that it challenged—the dry rationalism of the Enlightenment."[3] Lynn asserts that *On War* is notoriously misunderstood because readers ignore its historical context. Few read Clausewitz until he was made famous by the architect of German unification, Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke, who often cites Clausewitz's work as having influenced his operational theory and campaign development. In this vein, many readers who misinterpret Clausewitz's text likewise misinterpret Moltke, as they do not understand the intellectual context that generated his theories of action beyond those he borrowed from notoriously misunderstood Clausewitz. The use of Immanuel Kant and Johann Goethe's foundational Romantic philosophies as lenses through which to examine Moltke's theories and practices clarifies an aspect of this representation. Ultimately, Kant's ideas on transcendental realism, sublimity, freedom, morality, peace, and *Bildung*, and Goethe's complementary ideas on sublimity, *Bildung*, and Romantic biology shaped Moltke's world view to the extent that he structured military theories, plans, and operations in harmony with their basic ideas.

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[2] Antulio Echevarria, "Moltke and the German Military Tradition: His Theories and Legacies," *Parameters*, 1996, accessed 5 December 2016, http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/articles/96spring/echevarr.htm.

Felix Saure claims that Prussian Romanticism was a movement "which sought to transcend the divide between politics and art, the individual and the collective, and religion and the state. Romantic thinking envisioned a truly revolutionary new order which would not only overcome the deficits of the old world of enlightened absolutism, but also offer an alternative to the current project of the American and French Revolutions."[4] Romantics sought to marry all aspects of life together, from art to war. A reaction to the rigid absolutism of the Enlightenment, Romanticism was a movement grounded in first-hand experience and passion. War became a frequented space in which Romantics explored the relationship of freedom and morality, and, as subsequent sections will demonstrate, these ideas both impacted military tradition and reinforced values inherent in the Prussian "cult of the offensive."

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[3] John Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture from Ancient Greece to Modern America* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), 182.

[4] Felix Saure, "Agamemnon on the Battlefield of Leipzig: Wilhelm von Humboldt on Ancient Warriors, Modern Heroes, and *Bildung* through War," in *Enlightened War: German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz*, ed. Elizabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 92.

Immanuel Kant, the foundational Romantic philosopher, is well-known for his theories of transcendental idealism, sublimity, freedom, morality, the process of individual and social development (*Bildung)*, and peace. Even though he was never a soldier, Kant's foundational theories are relevant to the theory of war and warfare. The way in which he valued the mind's ability to deconstruct, analyze, and synthesize complex information recalls the respected role of the late nineteenth-century Prussian operational planner. He furthermore recognized the limitations of human knowledge as a form of unavoidable risk, and he envisioned the landscape of warfare as a borderland space, straddling the knowable and the sublime. Finally, the rational actor functioning both inside and outside of this space was galvanized with the knowledge of humanism, the knowledge that others felt as he did, and concluded that he should treat the other in accordance with this knowledge; war, then, was not a place for enacting anarchy and inflicting large scale suffering. Instead, Kant proposed that war was a deliberate, well-controlled tool.

Initially, Kant established the foundations for these various theories when he aimed to reconcile the problems created when David Hume's rejection of absolute knowledge resulted in a potential breakdown of objectivity. Kant accomplished this feat in his 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which he rethought the relationship between "mathematical necessity and contingent perceptions" and made freedom of individual action, relationships, and morality central concerns.[5] Borrowing from Bishop George Berkeley's "being is perceiving," Kant developed transcendental idealism, a belief that laws of objectivity rely upon subjective "conditions of possibility." While interpretations are often subjective, their object is not. Furthermore, people are equipped with a superior capability to create rules for organizing complex evidence that otherwise appears chaotic, and he terms these rules “categories.” From these categories, humans form synthetic judgements *a priori*, judgements previously termed mathematical or scientific. Kant privileged the mind’s ability to synthesize chaotic perceptual experience into intelligible relationships.[6]

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[5] Roger Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 9.

Kant clearly privileged human perception in his quest for truth, but he also recognized the limitations of this pursuit for absolute knowledge. As humans are part of the finite world, they can only manage the phenomena and information to which they have access.[7] Man may have fleeting encounters with the borders of the eternal, and Romanticists like Kant termed these encounters *sublime*. War is one such sublime experience in which man, on the brink of death and despair, earns a brief glimpse of the metaphysical realm. As this experience embodies a lack of control, Clausewitz termed it “the fog and friction of war,” many of whose elements are beyond control once it begins. Nevertheless, Clausewitz believed that man could mitigate the unmanageable through technology and morality.[8] Moltke later expressed similar sentiments about uncertainty that arose after the initial clash between the belligerents’ main bodies and sought to mitigate this uncertainty through the superior decision-making skills of his senior-level commanders and improved staff apparatus, a collective body that with a single mind deliberately categorized, deconstructed, and synthesized information, mirroring Kant’s ideal mind.[9]

Kant’s ideas about freedom and reason, which emerged in Prussian military theory, provide man with a sense of control in a largely uncontrollable universe. For Kant, everything in the material world is “subject to deterministic laws.” When one resists these naturally occurring laws, he or she is enacting freedom of choice, a behavior Kant aligned with the metaphysical realm if it relates to reason. Reason is the process by which thoughts become coherent. Through this coherence, reason provides thoughts a regulative, not constitutive, status. Reason is likewise innately tied to morality, through the recognition that one is obliged by universal laws to treat others well, because “others can suffer as I can.”[10] Transforming these thoughts into actions depends upon imperatives, the will to transform thought into action. Therefore, morality depends on the categorical imperative: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim will become a universal law.”[11] Kantian notions of freedom and autonomy therefore have very little to do with behaving as one wishes. Instead, they are components of a social compact to treat others fairly and equally.[12] Kant’s humanism clearly manifested itself in Moltke’s “Instructions for Large Unit Commanders,” in which Moltke insisted young officers must lead from the front and earn the trust of soldiers rather than rule them with an iron fist. Therefore, leadership was an obligation to an organization rather than a right to do as one pleases.[13]

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[6] Scruton, *Kant: A Very Short Introduction*, 13.

[7] Ibid., 14-5.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, ed by Daniel J. Hughes, trans Daniel J. Hughes and Harry Bell (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), 173.

Kant further grappled with humanism and the morality of warfare in his essay, “On Perpetual Peace.” Here, he wrestled with the complex moral and ethical implications of and obligations within warfare. In a Kantian paradigm, warfare appears opposite progress, which is characterized by reason and self-determination. Instead, international relationships forged through trade and an improved political process define social progress**.** Nevertheless, Kant did absorb the practice of warfare into his dominant philosophies, notably in relation to the sublime:

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[10] Scruton, *Kant*, 15.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid., 17.

[13] Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 173.

> Even war, if it is conducted in an orderly fashion and with respect for the sanctuary of citizens' rights, has something sublime about it and at the same time makes the mind of a people, which carries it on in this way, all the more sublime the more numerous dangers to which it is exposed and which it is able to meet with courage: in contrast, a long-lasting peace tends to bestow dominance on a mere commercial spirit and with it the basest egoism, cowardice, and effeminacy and to degrade the mind of the people.[14]

As Kant asserted, war, an act seemingly apart from progress, is a sphere in which men experience close encounters with elements of divine origin, and through these encounters they define their strength of mind and body. In German culture, the concept *Bildung*, a type of educational growth in which individual development is in harmony with social progress, aligns with the act of war so that metaphysical and existential battles define character.[15] From the early nineteenth-century, Kant and other Romantic philosophers treated war as a paradox, a sublime space in which great acts of salvation and barbarity occur. As Elisabeth Krimmer asserts, "They began to imagine it as an elemental, cleansing, even redemptive experience."[16] War thus becomes the ultimate test of manhood.

Peace, by contrast, facilitates the development of baser qualities. In Kant's estimation, trying, sometimes horrific situations enable greater individual development. In response to Kant's essay, a contemporary philosopher, Ludwick Heinrich Jacob, wrote, "war has the good result that the mind is elevated, that it gives rise to robust affects and creates opportunities everywhere so that the most beautiful virtues can show themselves."[17] While Kant may have been slightly more somber regarding these benefits, his message expressed similar approbation.

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[14] Elizabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson, "Introduction," in *Enlightened War: German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz*, ed. by Elizabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 7.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., 6.

[17] Ibid., 7.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe, like Kant, was a proto-Romantic thinker who had a similar impact on nineteenth-century military tradition through the concepts of sublimity, genius, and Romantic biology. Goethe's own wartime experiences heavily influenced his work. He served as a soldier in the 1792 battle of Valmy, in the failed invasion of France. After experiencing the Prussian defeat by an army comprised of equal numbers of regular army units and citizen-soldier militias, he famously provided solace to the defeated Prussian troops, remarking, "From this place, and from this day forth begins a new era in the history of the world, and you can all say that you were present at its birth."[18]

Goethe also experienced the sobering effects of warfare on the citizen population. On 13 October 1806, 14 years after the defeat at Valmy, French spoon guards, named by Berliners for the spoon carried in their shakos and known for undisciplined behavior, occupied the home that Goethe shared with his mistress, Christiane Vulpius, and their son. After the French first consumed his wine and then attacked him and his mistress in their bedroom with bayonets, Christiane organized the defense of the house, forcing the soldiers off and barricading the kitchen and cellar. Goethe wrote of the incident, "Fires, rapine, a frightful night ... Preservation of the house through steadfastness and luck."[19] While the poet attributed their preservation to luck, Christiane played a decisive role in their salvation. It is surely no coincidence that, eighteen years into their relationship, he married her less than a week after the episode.

Goethe's reflections on war were clearly troubled after having had such demoralizing personal experiences as both soldier and citizen. Elisabeth Krimmer notes that *Faust, Part II* is an especially effective text through which to comprehend Goethe's conflicted ideas about war. In her essay, Krimmer analyzes that work within the context of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Carl von Clausewitz's theories on war, noting the similarities between ideas on sublimity and genius. However, Goethe did not see war as an ennobling experience. While it may represent man's drive towards transcendence and creativity, it often results in the indulgence of his lowest impulses. In this vein, Goethe referred to war as "diese Erbkrankheit der Welt," as "this hereditary disease of the world." In Goethe's opinion, war was a disease, one inherent to human nature and passed down from father to son. While he did not directly support or write about the war effort, he was nevertheless interested in the theory and practice of war, counted many generals amongst his acquaintances, and functioned as an avid reader and critic of war memoirs and tactical texts.[20]

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[18] William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 193.

[19] Rudiger Safrinski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 71.

This interest manifested itself in Goethe's works, of which *Faust, Part II* is an excellent example with which to illustrate the prevalence of war in his writings, especially the two dominant motifs of sublimity and genius. [21] In *Faust, Part II,* Goethe recognized a sublime act as an otherworld creation, forged through pain and violence. Even though he viewed the link with considerable irony, Goethe clearly recognized the strong link between violence and creation, as evidenced in the character of Seismos, who represents the violence of a volcanic eruption. In discussing his creation of the world, Seismos claims that grand, sublime beauty results from this violence:

> As people will someday acknowledge;
> And if it were not for my shakes and jolts
> How would this world be such a thing of beauty?
> How could your mountains stand majestic
> In azure skies' translucent splendor
> Had I not shoved them there for you
> To see with picturesque delight?[22]

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[20] Elizabeth Krimmer, "'Schon weider Krieg! Der Kluge horts nicht gern': Goethe, Warfare, and *Faust II*," in *Enlightened War: German Theories and Cultures of Warfare from Frederick the Great to Clausewitz*, ed. Elizabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 125-128.

[21] Ibid., 127.

[22] Ibid., 139.

If Seismos had not violently "shoved" the mountains in place through "shakes and jolts," then the world's beautiful landscape would not exist. What destroys also creates. In this same conception, destructive acts of warfare can likewise result in the building of nations and bolstering of individuals.

On the micro-level, this duality of creation and destruction also exists in individual man. As Elizabeth Krimmer asserts,

> *Faust II* rests on Goethe's analysis of the origin of war, for he finds it rooted not only in man's lowest impulses, but also in his highest aspirations. Wars result from self-indulgence, greed, and lust for power, but they are also propelled by the same energy and hunger for activity that lie in the heart of human relationships and drive the creation of art. It is precisely this surprising identity of the drives that underlie war, love, and art that accounts for the inevitability of war.[23]

Goethe noted that the impulses that drive men to achieve high-minded aspirations are the same that lead them to war. The nobility of man manifests itself in the linkage between idealism and battlefield achievement.

Goethe likewise acknowledged the relationship between war and genius. Noting that the same mental urges create art and war, Goethe claimed, "personality is the effect of war and, consequently, the cradle of genius." He demonstrated this relationship in *Faust, Part II* as well: "For even though the years of war did not encourage the rise of true poetic interest and so were adverse to the muses for the moment, a multitude of free spirits experienced this time as formative, which now in peace come to their senses and emerge as great talents." Here Goethe's narrator acknowledges the formative quality of war, which transforms intellectual and creative potential into genius. Goethe's assertions about and allusions to war belong to the greater philosophical discussions about the possibility of eternal peace and mankind's transcendental strivings.[24]

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[23] Krimmer, *Enlightened War*, 128.

[24] Ibid., 140-1.

War shaped Goethe, and Goethe shaped war. Clausewitz read Goethe on the eve of the battle of Jena, and Moltke read him throughout his life, even modeling a short story from his youth in the manner of a famous Goethe tale. Moltke's Goethe reading, mentioned in the introduction, is the clearest proof for which we could ask of his lifelong involvement with the famous poet and dramatist.[25]

Goethe also influenced military intellectuals through his ideas on Romantic biology. He was interested in how ideas about individual development fit within larger systems and accordingly tied both man and nature to the same complex system in his organic conception of nature. Since nature is a living, breathing, developmental organism, the study of the natural world must proceed with this knowledge taken into consideration. Bill Bentley notes, "Romantic biologists like Goethe maintained that the aesthetic comprehension of the entire organism or of the whole interacting natural environment would be a necessary preliminary step in the scientific analysis of respective parts."[26] This comprehensive approach, as Bentley observes, characterized Clausewitz's approach to the study of war. As Clausewitz wrote, "War should be conceived as an organic whole whose parts cannot be separated, so that each individual act contributes to the whole and itself organizes in the central concept."[27] In his estimation, war is very much a part of the natural order, subject to non-linear growth and change through complex social order. As he asserted, "War belongs to the province of social life. War is not an activity of the will exerted upon inanimate matter like the mechanical arts, or upon a living but passive, yielding subject, like the human mind and human feeling like the fine arts, but against a living and reacting force."[28] Here, transcendental striving and acts of genius result in a complex system that is at once formidable yet fragile, eternal yet uncertain, because of the ever-changing individual acts of which it is comprised.

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[25] Bill Bentley, "Clausewitz and the Blue Flower of Romanticism: Understanding *On War*," in *The Canadian Military Journal*, 2008, accessed 5 December 2016, http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol13/no4/page36-eng.asp.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

As the above analysis demonstrates, Romantic philosophy, in reaction to the compartmentalized views of the Enlightenment, valued the comprehensive study of entire systems while recognizing individual contributions and development. As war was a central component of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Prussian life and an access point through which to glimpse the transcendental and eternal, philosophers such as Kant and Goethe theorized about it at great length. In turn, their philosophies influenced Prussian Army leadership and culture.

Moltke: Forever the Romantic

"The famous man of literature and letters who, in the 1820s and 1830s, embraced cosmopolitan and Romanticist views, had hardened into a cynical conservative," writes Antulio Echevarria.[29] He contends that the young Helmuth von Moltke was a starry-eyed Romantic, full of interest in literature and philosophy. Yet he counters this claim by asserting that Moltke's experiences as a middle-aged man, most specifically those associated with the Revolution of 1848, changed his Romantic outlook into something more traditionally conservative. While this notion that Moltke did not retain a Romantic outlook may hold true in certain respects, for instance in his thoughts about German democracy—though one would be hard pressed to find any evidence that he was ever a true democrat—it does not hold true for most other aspects of his early Romantic outlook, including ideas on synthetic judgements *a priori*, sublimity, *Bildung*, and genius. A careful examination of Moltke's formative childhood moments, mid-life influences and literature, military correspondence and theories—most notably those in his "Instructions for Large Unit Commanders" and a voice recording captured during his retirement— illustrate how these ideas were major components of his lifelong character that colored his treatment of war.

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[29] Echevarria, "Moltke and the German Military Tradition."

Experiences from Moltke's childhood indicate reasons why Moltke would find certain elements of Romanticism appealing and others abhorrent. When he was a mere six-year-old boy in 1806, French soldiers sacked his family's home in Lubeck. About the looting, Moltke's father said, "For three days they pillaged the town ... My house was looted, which was a great loss to me."[30] This experience weighed heavily on the young Moltke, who developed lifelong animosity towards the French and the democratic revolution. Otto Friedrich argues that clear connections exist between Moltke's childhood experience and "the retribution that Moltke later exacted from the French on the battlefield of Sedan."[31] In this respect, it makes sense that Moltke gravitated towards the kind of hierarchical stability a monarchy provides.

Nevertheless, his experiences as a Danish cadet at the Military Academy in Copenhagen tempered his disdain towards certain elements of individual freedom. At the academy, Moltke experienced both verbal and physical abuse. In one instance, an officer elbowed Moltke in the nose when Moltke, standing in formation, simply stretched his neck.[32] Later in life, he remarked that the cadets were "treated much too harshly," and "the tone in which we were spoken to was very harsh, there was no trace of love or sympathy in it. In moral training the institution was not a success; there was visible mistrust which was extremely injurious in its effects."[33] He expressed similar remarks in a letter to his brother Ludwig, in which he famously asserted that he received "no education but thrashing." In this same letter, he claimed that this "Spartan education" deprived young men of initiative and desire to risk-take and experiment:

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[30] Otto Friedrich, *Blood and Iron: From Bismarck to Hitler the Von Moltke Family's Impact on German History* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 26.

[31] Ibid., 29.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid.

> This want of self-reliance and constant reference to the opinions of others, even the preponderance of reason over inclination, often give me moral depressions, such as others feel from opposite causes. They were in such a hurry to efface every prominent characteristic, every peculiarity, as they would have nipped every shoot of a yew-hedge, that the result was weakness of character.[34]

Even though Moltke's childhood experiences reinforced the prevailing cultural attitude of the Prussian elite, which privileged the monarchy as well as landed aristocracy and disdained democracy, his remark illustrates the ways in which he valued creativity, ingenuity, and independent thought in this educated class of young men who were pursuing *Bildung*. Kant's transcendental idealism is evident in Moltke's ideas about the "want of self-reliance" and "preponderance of reason over inclination." Clearly, Moltke rejected the rational principles that characterized the French Enlightenment in favor of the empirical ones Kant used to develop his theories on synthetic judgements *a priori*. Rationalists belonging to the French Enlightenment believed that knowledge was earned independently of sensory experience. Empiricists like Moltke instead believed that sensory experience was at the root of all knowledge. In this vein, intuition and creativity played a large role in the acquisition of knowledge. Not only did Moltke suffer depression from lack of any kind of creative education, but he argued that the one he received based upon rational, standard principles weakened character. Therefore, while he may have rejected total independence for the dregs of society, like the looting French soldiers, he certainly valued independence of mind within the context of Kantian notions of freedom and autonomy, especially for future Danish officers.

Even after graduation and his transition to the Prussian service in 1821, Romantic descriptions colored what could otherwise become bland work. Early in his career, Moltke surveyed a good deal of Prussian territory. In his survey, remarks one biographer, Moltke expressed admiration for the "grandeur of nature," in a manner similar to the ways in which the great Romantics used it as a metaphor for sublimity: "In one of his letters he dilated with ecstasy on the vast panorama of varied beauty, which unfolds itself to the eye from the top of Schneekoppe—the highest peak of the Giant Hills—the region through which, forty years afterwards, he was to move the armed strength of Prussia to the field of Sadowa."[35] Implying the connection to sublimity, the biographer notes that this landscape will ultimately transform into a space of heroics, death, redemption, and transformation.

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[34] Otto Friedrich, *Blood and Iron*, 29.

Moltke carried these ideas on Romanticism into his post-graduate writing. In 1827, he published a short story titled "The Two Friends," which contains many of the same ideas he expressed during his cadet years. Felix Dahn, a relative contemporary, noted in 1892 the influence of Romantic thinkers on Moltke's narrative: "I am also inclined to trace the influence of Goethe's later writings: firstly, in the disposition to bring the tone of the landscape into harmony with the mood of the human actors, and secondly, in the interruption of the tale by the reflections and generalizations advanced by the author."[36] Dahn most notably drew these connections between Moltke's style and Goethe's in *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1787, though the narratives diverge significantly. Nevertheless, Goethe's tale is foundational to Romanticism, and Moltke's connection to it, even if only in style, once again betrayed his knowledge of and affinity for the movement.

The text itself is rife with Romantic allusion and metaphor. In the opening scene, Moltke's narrator describes the landscape:

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[35] William O'Connor Morris, *Moltke: A Biographical and Critical Study* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971), 9.

[36] Felix Dahn "Prefatory Remarks" in *Moltke, His Life And Character Sketched in Journals, Letters, Memoirs, A Novel, and Autobiographical Notes*, trans. Mary Herms (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), 38.

> The beams of the setting sun shed a golden light over the landscape, which only a short time ago had been the scene of war and bloodshed, but it was now the picture of peace. Thousands of the brave ones who had fought there, were now laid to rest; their ambitions, their bold projects, and their sufferings were hidden under the green shroud of a new spring.[37]

Like many traditional Romantic scenes, this one uses a natural landscape to recall the ways in which vitality comingles with decay and death, sometimes revealing sublime glimpses of absolute knowledge and truth. Further solidifying this assertion, he continues, “Thus Nature wipes away with a kindly hand the traces of hatred and enmity which men leave behind them. Storms blow over and are forgotten. Not always so with man; he is too often like the reed broken by the storm, unable to rise again.”[38] Here, Nature is a sublime agent. Juxtaposed against transient human existence, it represents the eternal realm.

Yet the tale does recognize the value of war in developing young men into honorable beings. By contrast to women, whom the narrator asserts devote themselves wholly to love, men find the highest honor and personal interest in military service: “With a woman, love is the dominating passion; it excludes all others, it is the purpose of her life—her very life itself. But with man it leaves room for many other motives, and at the call of honor it loses its brilliancy, like the stars at the appearance of the sun; but it lasts, and shines again, as soon as the others subside.”[39] As expressed in the idea of *Bildung*, men seek honor, harmony, and growth through trials that serve the self and society.

While many of Moltke’s Romantic allusions are serious, some are playful, even lighthearted. His ferryman is not unlike the Shakespearean fool, who in his utter ridiculousness expresses truths about the narrative world that remain unseen to conventional characters. In remarking upon his transient lifestyle, the ferryman problematizes his national allegiances: “But as I pass a great part of my time on the water between the two realms on account of my business, I am often troubled by doubts, and, so to speak, I am nobody’s subject, or everybody’s, especially your Grace’s. But I shall come out directly and no doubt learn by the appearance of your grace to which party I belong.”[40] In his waffling, the fool, while seemingly foolish, legitimately problematizes Westphalian order. A transient, liminal figure, the ferryman struggles to identify himself with a single territory, and in this struggling, suggests the artificial nature of a national identity. Clearly, the author did not find national identity to be pure artifice; however, he does recognize that personal and collective identification establish reality, and this recognition reflects Kant’s notion of transcendental idealism, in which the laws of objectivity rely upon subjective conditions of possibility.

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[37] Helmuth von Moltke, “The Two Friends,” in *Moltke, His Life And Character Sketched in Journals, Letters, Memoirs, A Novel, and Autobiographical Notes*, trans. Mary Herms (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1892), 39.

[38] Moltke, “The Two Friends,” 39.

[39] Ibid., 51.

In an 1841 essay about the western boundary of Prussia, in which he evaluated France’s claims of territory near the Rhine, Moltke identified the ways in which French ideals influenced Prussian thought, further blurring the lines of absolute identification. Noting how Rousseau and other French thinkers provided a foundation for German Romanticism, he wrote, “The philosophical school of Kant and Fichte, the rationalism in Protestant theology striving for supremacy, many historians and poets shared these sympathies.”[41] He then accounted for Prussia’s susceptibility to French rationalist influence, which bolsters notions of ideal government and humanism, in the German state’s lack of a unified national identity. This moment, regardless of its valuation of the French, is particularly important because it reveals Moltke’s familiarity with the major Romantic spokespersons for German Idealism, whose thought he had aligned with much of his own thinking.

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[40] Moltke, “The Two Friends,” 71.

[41] Helmuth von Moltke, *Essays, Speeches, and Memoirs of Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke*, vol. 1, trans. Charles Flint McClumpha, Major Barter, and Mary Herms (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1898), 119.

Contrary to Echevarria's claims, Moltke's Romantic outlook survived the revolution and the Austro-Prussian war. To be sure, it dominated his 1869 "Instructions for Large Unit Commanders," the text that provides the foundation for Germany's large unit operations theory for at least 70 years.[42] Considered the most important guide to understanding the practical application of German military theory,[43] it likewise illustrates the wartime application of Romantic philosophy. It contains clear directives as to how the military leader enacts *Bildung*, manifests transcendental idealism, and practices the Romantic conception of freedom.

Each of these elements is depicted in the first section, titled, "General." Moltke asserted, "In peace, the moral element seldom comes to be of value (*Geltung*); in war it forms the precondition of every victory, the true value of a unit. In war, the qualities of character weigh more heavily than those of reason (*Verstand*)."[44] Rather than begin the handbook with a rational assertion, he began with a moral and theoretical imperative. One's own judgment, which can respond to ambiguity and evolving strategies, is far more valuable than a standard set of rules. He continued by explaining the role of the leader within this framework. The leader is someone who leads from the front and makes firm decisions to overcome what he soon thereafter terms "the fog of uncertainty."[45] Each of these wartime imperatives betrays a Romantic vision, which includes components of the categorical imperative, *Bildung*, and transcendental idealism. Traces of the categorical imperative and *Bildung* appear in his direction to platoon and company leadership. Here, young leaders must earn the trust of their soldiers through personal conduct, most notably through consistency and bravery. While a young leader may not have the mental capacity to process information and make decisions at the level of general officer, he can successfully maintain the offensive through leading by example. Moltke appealed to both the moral and humanistic component of leadership—officers must earn rather than simply demand the trust of subordinates—reflecting Kant's categorical imperative, the recognition that others suffer as I do and must be treated per this knowledge. He also appealed to the tradition of *Bildung* in his ideas on the education of leaders through trial and subsequent acts of bravery.

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[42] Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War,* 171.

[43] Ibid., 172

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 173.

He did not invoke transcendental idealism until his charge to senior commanders, who "must make the most difficult decisions under conditions of physical exertion, mental excitement, deprivation, and suffering" and base these decisions upon reports that are often "insufficient, perhaps contradictory, or even entirely absent."[46] Moltke reminded commanders that no clear information presents itself upon which to make easy, clear decisions. Instead, the often strung-out, exhausted senior-level commander must rely upon his judgement and intuition to deconstruct, categorize, and reassemble all the given information on-hand in the spirit of Kant's observations about how one forms synthetic judgments *a priori.* While information may be unreliable, he expected his commanders to maintain clarity of mind and be certain of their decisions.

In the following assertion on how the head and the whole interact, Moltke invoked both Kant and Goethe. Discussing the order of battle, he claimed, "Special goals demand special formations, detachments, advance guards, or other commands. But even then, one should bring together what belongs together and build no new whole from parts that previously belonged to different commands."[47] His major criticism on the prospect of these new formations was their lack of a staff, which for Moltke was, above all, synthetic judgement *a priori.* It is the head that processes information and makes qualified determinations. Without it, the body blindly bumbles about. Goethe's ideas of Romantic biology likewise resonate at this point. For Romantic thinkers like Goethe, social bodies form a kind of organism. Here, Moltke saw the unit as a kind of organism and its potential hasty reorganization as a form of decapitation.

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[46] Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War,* 173.

[47] Ibid., 177.

The above moments from "Instructions for Large Unit Commanders" are three examples of many that illustrate not only the persistent impact of Romanticism on Moltke, but also its impact on the history of German warfare. Even past both wars of unification, Moltke maintained his allegiance to the Romantic philosophers. In a letter dated 6 March 1881, Professor Albert Jansen, the former master at the Royal War Academy, initiated correspondence with Moltke over a connection he identified between the field marshal's letters and Kant's theories in "On Perpetual Peace":

> Most honored general Field-Marshal. Of those who read with interest and admiration your Excellency's views on the discussion of Permanent Peace, or rather on the ideal significance of war, only a very few will have the privilege of communicating their sentiments on this matter to you. I should be the last to usurp this favour. But just as your Excellency's second letter is being published, my thoughts have been directed by my studies to Kant, whose views upon the matter correspond most strikingly with your ideas and sentiments. As I am convinced that they will be of interest to you, I take the liberty of quoting them, and if, which is only too probable, you should already be acquainted with them, I ask you to excuse my zeal, which solely arose from the satisfaction of seeing a general and a philosopher in complete harmony in regard to the most sublime question of political morality.[48]

Jansen wrote in response to a series of letters between Moltke and Johann Kaspar Bluntschi, a prominent professor of constitutional law at Heidelberg University. In these letters, Moltke responded to criticisms from the Berlin press by arguing that war was an unavoidable evil, not one that he wished for, as the press claimed.[49] In one letter dated 11 December 11 1880, Moltke wrote, "Eternal peace is a dream—and not even a beautiful one. War is part of God's world order. Within it unfolds the noblest virtues of men, courage and renunciation, loyalty to duty and readiness for sacrifice—at the hazard of one's life. Without war the world would sink into a swamp of materialism."[50]

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[48] Albert Jansen, *Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke as a Correspondent*, trans. Mary Herms (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 281.

[49] Ibid., 286.

Moltke clearly invoked the Romantic tradition of *Bildung*, which Jansen enthusiastically identified and located in Kant's "On Perpetual Peace." After his initial address to Moltke, Jansen provided him with the quotes from "Perpetual Peace" that he found most relevant to Moltke's assertions:

> What is it which fills even the savage mind with the deepest admiration? A man who neither fears nor is afraid, who therefore does not shirk from danger, but at once with due deliberation goes vigorously to work. This special reverence fit the warrior continues to be found among those of highest civilization, but they require in action what he should exhibit all the virtues of Peace—gentleness, compassion, and even seemly care of his own person—just because the inevitability of his minds in danger is evinced thereby, and although in comparing the Statesman, and the General, we may differ as to the measure of the esteem which each deserves, yet aesthetic opinion has given sentence in favour of the latter, Even war, when conducted with discipline, and due respect for civil rights, has about it something ennobling, and when so conducted elevates a person in proportion to the peril to which they are exposed and which they have the courage to sustain. On the other hand a long peace fosters a mere commercial spirit, together with the base egotism, cowardice and effeminacy and thus has a degrading effect on the mind of a people.[51]

Little difference exists between the ideas expressed in Moltke's correspondence and those in Kant's essay. For both men, the conduct of war enables warriors, most notably the general, to cultivate noble virtues; a period of peace, by contrast, brings out baser qualities. In harmony, Kant and Moltke described the ways in which dangerous experiences in the service of social progress develop the most noble type of character.

Interestingly, Moltke claimed in his response to Jansen that he was not familiar with ideas from "Perpetual Peace," even though his essay on the western boundary demonstrates his familiarity with Kant: "In reply to your kind letter of the 6th inst. accept my most sincere thanks for the kind enclosure of some quotations of Kant on the ideal importance of war. As I was not acquainted with them, I was greatly interested in reading them and having my views confirmed in this direction."[52] While Moltke claimed not to have read this piece, he nevertheless affirms that his and Kant's philosophies are one and the same.

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[50] Helmuth von Moltke, *Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke as a Correspondent*, 281-2.

[51] Ibid., 282.

Finally, Moltke, as a retired man, chose to honor the works of Goethe for all time by making his recording. Quoting *Faust*, he discussed the soul's desire to transcend its physical chains, and he used the backdrop of nature's vast expanse to depict the sublime gateway between corporeal and metaphysical realms. Perhaps in quoting these lines, Moltke, "the poising eagle,"[53] was reflecting upon his own deeds and yearnings as he neared the end of his days.

While experiences with French soldiers at an early age helped sour his attitude towards the French Revolution, key moments in Moltke's early military education caused him to reflect on and value certain elements of independent choice and action that enable personal and communal growth and, in some rare instances, genius to flourish. These ideas that formed early-on persisted into young adulthood, where they manifested in his scholarly interests and creative writing. Surviving his midlife career in the military, these ideas and values remained a core component of his character and appeared in his correspondence and military instruction to subordinate commanders. Further illustrating this claim, the ways in which Moltke returned to these ideas in retirement, as shown in his voice recordings, prove that ideas gleaned from Romantic philosophy not only formed his early character, but also remained a central component of his lifelong self. Furthermore, they shaped him throughout his life to such an extent that they had a gross influence on German unification.

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[52] Helmuth von Moltke, *Field Marshall Helmuth von Moltke as a Correspondent*, 283.

[53] Puille, "Prince Bismarck and Count Moltke Before the Recording Horn."

Romanticism, Staff Organization, and the Planning Process

As discussed in the previous sections, the Romantic movement impacted Moltke's comprehension of individual and collective development in warfare. Moltke then expressed this comprehension in the controlled planning process, through which he worked to offset the risk of impending confrontation with the sublime. An analysis of key moments in the planning phase of the Austro-Prussian War in relation to these Romantic constructs, most notably Kant's transcendental idealism, reveals the ways in which the values of an epoch, in this instance Romanticism, influence preparations for warfare.

For Moltke, the planning process and initial deployment defined the operation: "Even a single error in the original assembly (*Versammlung*) of the armies can hardly ever be made good again during the entire course of the campaign."[54] He went on to assert that such miscalculations could be avoided through careful planning, for "all measures for the assembly can be thoroughly thought out long in advance."[55] The way in which he depended upon reason to secure victory surely reflects Kant's ideas on transcendental idealism and sublimity. As mentioned in the first chapter, Kant's idea of transcendental idealism relies upon the premise that objective laws are dependent upon subjective "conditions of possibility." Objects are real, but individuals often interpret their significance in unique ways. Fortunately, per Kant, the human mind is a superior machine that organizes complex evidence into categories, or rules, and synthesizes it into synthetic judgements *a priori*, judgements previously associated with math or science.[56] As subsequent analysis demonstrates, Moltke's reorganization and use of the Prussian General Staff betrayed his similar privileging of subjective reason.

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[54] Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 91.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Scruton, *Kant*, 13.

However, Moltke and Kant recognized the limitations of human reason, which is finite and has limited access to absolute knowledge. While people may manage the information to which they have access, much information reveals itself in later moments or never at all. When this mostly inaccessible knowledge presents itself in fleeting moments, termed sublime, it often reveals glimpses into what Kant understands to be part of the eternal realm.[57] For Moltke, this experience was central to the act of warfare, which is characterized by ambiguity and confusion. As nothing is certain in war, "no plan survives contact with the enemy's main body."[58] By contrast, "strategy is a system of expedients,"[59] through which planners mitigate the uncertainly of contact by structuring the initial deployment to the greatest degree possible.

Moltke reinforced systems necessary to enable this planning well before the Austro-Prussian War. In this regard, he drastically expanded the role of the Prussian General Staff, the better to train for and plan future campaigns. The way in which he expanded the staff reflected a large, Kantian human mind, so to speak. It was comprised of constructed categories that aided Moltke in processing, deconstructing, and synthesizing complex information into a usable plan, in the same way the human mind processes synthetic judgments *a priori*. For instance, he developed a mobilization section to manage rail schedules and troop movements. In this vein, he participated in the strategic railroad development program, which facilitated deployment of armies to multiple fronts. He then used his mobilization section to establish the detailed movement timetables for the Austro-Prussian War, deploying troops along a 275-mile-long front that extended from the borders of Saxony and Bohemia into Silesia.[60]

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[57] Scruton, *Kant*, 14-5.

[58] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 152.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Gordon Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), 32.

Similarly, he added a geographical and statistics section, which studied and analyzed foreign armies, weather, and cartography. The staff members within each of these sections were highly-trained, well-respected officers, whose thorough analysis contributed greatly to the synthesized operational plan. Under Moltke, the general staff became a formidable institution that wielded a large degree of influence. Indeed, the Chief of Staff was held accountable for not only good staff work, but also for Prussia's military victories. Moltke contributed to and operated within a period that valued complex thinking and, clearly in his instance, genius.

Concurrent with his restructuring of the General Staff into a more powerful, anticipatory, and effective operational planning element, Moltke trained the army to better enact its plans in times of confusion and uncertainty, effectively offsetting some of the risk. To transform tactics and operations into muscle memory, his general staff ran a detailed, time-consuming schedule of unit maneuvers, in which he had a "distinct preference for concentric operations by separate parts of the army."[61] During exercises, soldiers trained not only on individual skills but also collectively to master the desired shape of the offensive's conclusion, the *kesselschlacht*, the cauldron battle or battle of encirclement. For Moltke, this was the operational approach that allowed for the quickest and most decisive victory. To train his general staff and accustom his subordinates to his way of thinking, Moltke had them participate in frequent war games and an annual staff ride. [62] Not only can one perceive his Romantic conception of rationalism at work, but also his conception of *Bildung*, the way in which individual and social growth are reciprocal; individual acts of bravery contribute to social progress.

Moltke's Kantian emphasis on prior planning and training furthermore reflects the great Romantic strategist Carl von Clausewitz's approach. War, in Clausewitz's estimation, is a phenomenon consisting of multiple incomprehensible components. As irrational passions, especially enmity, reign supreme in warfare, many circumstances and behaviors therein are unpredictable: “Men with ‘pounding hearts’ do not behave in predictable patterns, or any patterns at all. War is the domain of uncertainty.”[63] As Clausewitz asserted somewhat paradoxically, “everything in war is very simple, [but] the simplest thing is difficult.”[64] Moltke reorganized his staff and training program to mitigate this uncertainty and in so doing enabled Prussia’s army to achieve its strategic goal.[65]

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[61] Citino, *The German Way of War,* 151.

[62] Ibid., 150-2.

Planning for the Austro-Prussian war serves as an example for the way in which Moltke absorbed Kant’s ideas on transcendental idealism and sublimity into his operational planning with superior results. From 1860 to 1866, Moltke actively produced and revised multiple operational plans, a process that reveals his belief in concepts like transcendental idealism, the way in which all conditions are open to the realm of possibility.[66] Possibility is important within a Romantic conception of the world, for it recognizes life’s inclination towards change: nothing is fixed, and no truth can be wholly perceived. We only catch glimpses of it in rare, sublime moments, when stress and fear reduce our ability to think logically. Therefore, the operational planner and strategist set conditions by foreseeing and planning for an array of contingencies. While an Enlightenment thinker expects given principles to work in similar scenarios, that interior lines are superior in all tactical engagements, a Romantic thinker may not take such a notion for granted. Instead, he may evaluate how meaning is made and reality is shaped through interactions between individual agents and institutions.

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[63] Citino, *The German Way of War,*145.

[64] Ibid.

[66] Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz,* 28-9.

Within a Romantic paradigm, strategists and tacticians alike work to mitigate uncertainty and create conditions favorable to success by acknowledging and responding to complex, ever-changing conditions. Moltke's methodology for the war of 1866 serves as a prime example of such Romantic planning. Certainly, Moltke's detailed planning attempted to mitigate any uncertainty that may result from the divergent perspectives, demands, and actions of his leaders and enemy, and he relied on the superior mind, for which the staff functions as a metaphor, to conceive of and organize coherent plans.

For Moltke, the strategic environment was greater Germany, *Grossdeustchland*, an amalgam of territories and states controlled by Prussia and Austria. Within this environment were two kings who paradoxically desired peace and unification, albeit differently, but concluded that a unified state could only arise from civil war. As Moltke recognized the reluctance of both monarchs, but more notably King William, he anticipated that Prussia would enter the war in a defensive posture, while Austria would attack first, with its goal to destroy Prussia. Although he recognized that both monarchs would be reluctant participants in such an intra-Germanic war, he concluded that William would prefer Prussia to enter the war in a defensive posture, since he pursued the goals of unifying Germany under Prussia's banner and putting an end to Austrian hegemony. Austria, on the other hand, would most likely attack first with the goal of destroying Prussia, as its aim was to put an end to northern hopes of German leadership**.** Having thus perceived the national goal, Moltke accordingly devised multiple strategies, based upon varying conditions, to lure the Austrian Army, the center of gravity, into battle, destroy it, and force Austria to the bargaining table.[67]

Fortunately, the detailed planning he and his staff conducted prior to war helped streamline the operation and set conditions for eventual success. Reflecting later in life upon the origins of these plans, Moltke asserted, “it was a struggle long foreseen and calmly prepared for, recognized as a necessity by the cabinet, not for territorial aggrandizement, but for an ideal end —the establishment of power. Not a foot of land was exacted from conquered Austria, but she had to renounce all part in the hegemony of Germany.”[68] While Moltke did not have full control over the initial deployment phase, he was nevertheless prepared with contingencies upon which he had been working for years, as this engagement was one Prussia in many ways desired and for which its leaders had planned accordingly.

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[67] Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 27-9.

In the Romantic tradition, Moltke fully relied upon thorough, logical planning to offset any of the confusion and chaos surely to result from the sublime act of warfare, where chance above certainty reigns supreme. Pre-deployment activities were planned to the greatest detail, as they could be more tightly controlled. However, the operation itself was more loosely constructed and instead centered on possibility, flexibility, and the generation of options. If not every variable can be known and accounted for in planning, then plans must be adaptive should they succeed. Once again in the Romantic tradition, Moltke exploited to positive effect the benefits and limitations of subjective rationalism in the planning and execution phases.

Auftragstaktik: A Romantic Construction

While Moltke was an extensive and thorough planner, he also recognized that “No plan survives contact with the enemy’s main body.”[69] As a result, Moltke believed that unit commanders required a large degree of flexibility to react to changing conditions on the battlefield. He claimed, “Only the layman perceives the campaign in terms of a fixed original conception, carried out in all details and rigidly followed until the end.”[70] Once an operation begins, commanders must remain flexible even as they rely on firm foundations.[71] To avoid a strict adherence to any fixed conception, Moltke codified *Auftragstaktik*, or mission tactics. Through this method, commanders devise missions that they then describe in clear, concise orders; however, they leave the means and method of achieving the mission to the officer who is leading it on the ground.[72] Therefore, as the actual series of battles in a campaign ensued, Moltke relinquished to subordinate commanders a good deal of the artistry he exercised in planning and initial execution phases. If commanders understood the basic principles of the mission and the preferred aggressive means by which the Prussian Army would achieve it, Moltke believed operational success was possible. However, he did not abdicate his leadership responsibilities. Having carefully studied the American Civil War, he apprehended the value of using the telegraph in the field as an effective line of communication to disseminate the broad guidance commanders would need to develop plans and meet the commanding general's intent.

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[68] Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 2.

[69] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 152.

[70] Ibid.

Moltke's *Auftragstaktik* comprises a methodology through which he provided his subordinate commanders minimal mission orders and great flexibility to operate within the bounds of his intent. It stems from Lieutenant General Gerhard von Scharnhorst's revolution in Prussian military affairs, but Moltke made it his own. An understanding of these theories within a Romantic framework reveals that his version of *Auftragstaktik* was a deliberate, Romantic wartime philosophy and practice that worked to mitigate unforeseeable and uncontrollable elements of warfare through the privileging of individual and social relations. It was not, as others have suggested, directly tied to the military's current conception of mission command; it is a product of its time and above-mentioned tensions. The subsequent analysis of the Austro-Prussian war illustrates this claim.

The idea of *Auftragstaktik* originated sixty years before Moltke's armies entered the Austro-Prussian war. Prussia's failures against the French in 1806 prompted military leaders to transform a discipline-oriented military culture into one that encouraged tactical initiative. The Prussian tradition of “marching in lockstep” resulted in an obedient, mechanistic force that was no match for the innovative French Army.[73] Realizing Prussia’s tactical shortcomings, Scharnhorst, influenced by elements of the French Revolution and proto-Romantic thinkers like Hegel and Goethe, sought to revolutionize Prussian doctrine, a task at which he succeeded in 1812. Paret writes, “The new infantry manual prescribed simple combinations of open and closed evolutions in concise terms that avoided formality and emphasized individual initiative.”[74] In addition to encouraging tactical initiative, the Prussian Army began to incorporate its educated mercantile class by conscripting it into its Jaeger and Landwehr forces.[75] These changes resulted in a dynamic formation in which the whole of Prussian society, not just the landed and lower classes, had a stake.

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[71] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 152.

[72] Ibid.

Nevertheless, peace in 1814 dampened this ambitious evolution, and the landed class reasserted traditional control over this system, evidenced by the tensions Moltke experienced with his royal subordinate commanders. Moltke, an admirer of Scharnhorst and Clausewitz, advocated for independent initiative, but the initiative his commanders took often consisted of deliberate acts of insolence. Moltke ultimately straddled the line between encouraging initiative and chastising insubordination. Nevertheless, his general Romantic wartime philosophy provided the flexibility necessary to transform insubordination into victory.

In Moltke’s implementation of *Auftragstaktik,* a dialogue occurred between multiple Romantic theories, to include reason, freedom, sublimity, genius, complexity, and *Bildung.* For one, Moltke privileged the keen minds of his subordinates to make well-reasoned, on the spot decisions from within the theater of war, amidst sublimity-induced uncertainty and confusion. Furthermore,

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[73] Peter Paret, *The Cognitive Challenge of War: Prussia 1806* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 36.

[74] Ibid., 92.

[75] Ibid., 98-99.

Kant's Romantic conception of freedom helped contain those individual choices within the context of civic duty. Together, Kant's ideas about reason and freedom highlighted the human mind's ability to grapple with complex information about the material world, make sense of it, and root its findings in the moral imperative that actions must contribute to the highest of orders rather than the basest of desires.[76] Freedom in this context resulted from resistance to certain deterministic laws within the material world, but it was a type of reasoned resistance meant to contribute to the greater good. The subsequent campaign analysis will demonstrate the ways in which Moltke's subordinate commanders practiced such freedoms, to include willful acts of disobedience, which ultimately resulted in a contribution to the collective, an adherence to Kant's categorical imperative.[77]

Goethe's theories on genius and complex systems likewise reveal *Auftragstaktik* as an innately Romantic notion. As Goethe believed war reflected man's basest desires and highest instincts, he noted that the best and worst character traits had opportunities to burgeon accordingly. As Goethe claimed, "personality is the effect of war and, consequently, the cradle of genius."[78] If war brought out extreme personality traits in individual belligerents, then the best possible extreme was genius. Genius, of course, most obviously thrived in the positions of those who could best exploit it, and therefore it was most often tied to generalship.

Furthermore, Goethe identified a relationship between the micro and the macro, genius and sublimity, as both man and nature belonged to the same complex system. As previously discussed, "Romantic biologists like Goethe maintained that the aesthetic comprehension of the entire organism or of the whole interacting natural environment would be a necessary preliminary step in the scientific analysis of respective parts."[79] In this regard, large social bodies have agency, make unpredictable choices—good and bad—and therefore do not behave in wholly predictable patterns, although they can be studied at the macro level, a position from where one can better understand individual properties.

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[76] Scruton, *Kant*, 15.

[77] Ibid., 17.

[78] Krimmer, *Enlightened War,* 140.

[79] Bentley, "Clausewitz and the Blue Flower of Romanticism."

As both living and breathing individuals and systems make autonomous choices, those choices will be accordant with the values of their epoch. Therefore, Kant's conception of *Bildung* is important within this context, as it discusses growth through trial. Within a Prussian Romantic framework, this notion describes how men define themselves through acts of social sacrifice, such as war, and are compelled to march to the sound of the cannons. For Moltke, this overarching value helped him interpret how men and the systems within which they operated behaved, which in turn helped him to mitigate some uncertainty. Certainly, Moltke's implementation of *Auftragstaktik*, which appealed to the *Bildung* tradition, accounted for such behaviors.

Indeed, Moltke's implementation of these techniques makes sense, as he was clearly the embodiment of Romantic genius. In this vein, he possessed that same keen mind that Romantic philosophers identified, and in this capacity, he both served as evidence of their claims and as someone who directly employed them. As mentioned in the previous chapter, initial planning is crucial to set conditions for and mitigate confusion within the act of warfare. In 1866, unforeseen events, to include William's stalling tactics and subordinate commanders' insubordination, confounded his initial plan. Moltke was therefore forced to reevaluate and improvise upon various operational elements to maintain Prussian advantage. Fortunately, as one analyst of his campaigns remarks, "Moltke indeed possessed the peculiar genius that characterized great captains of the past like Gustavus and Fredrick and Napoleon. The Danish war gave the first intimation that he had the kind of imagination which, amid the fog of war, immediately grasps all the possibilities in a given situation."[80] Bismarck once said of him that Moltke was "unconditionally reliable and, at the same time, cold to the very heart."[81] In any situation, despite unanticipated roadblocks, Moltke effectively envisioned the desired end state, devised a plan, and maintained the conviction to see it through to the next requirement for revision or action. As the war of 1866 ensued, Moltke's genius became apparent through his implementation of *Auftragstaktik* to confront the fog of war.

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[80] Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 24.

At the outset of the campaign, Moltke intended first to defeat the northern German states and afterwards the southern. To protect the right flank of the Second Army as well as secure the border between Brandenburg and the Rhineland's industrial provinces, he needed a quick and decisive victory.[82] To set the conditions for this victory, he directed the Elbe Army, advancing by way of Rumburg, and First Army, advancing through Friedland, to link up at a key decisive point to their south, the Iser River. He directed the Second Army to cross the Riesengebirge Mountains in the east and then head west to link up with the other two armies. His orders to the army commanders themselves were flexible: "advance in a concentric fashion, find the Austrian main body, fix it in place wherever it happened to be, then affect a junction of all three Prussian armies to destroy it," preferably in a *kesselschlacht*.[83]

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[81] Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 24.

[82] Citino, *The German Way of War,* 153.

[83] Ibid., 161.

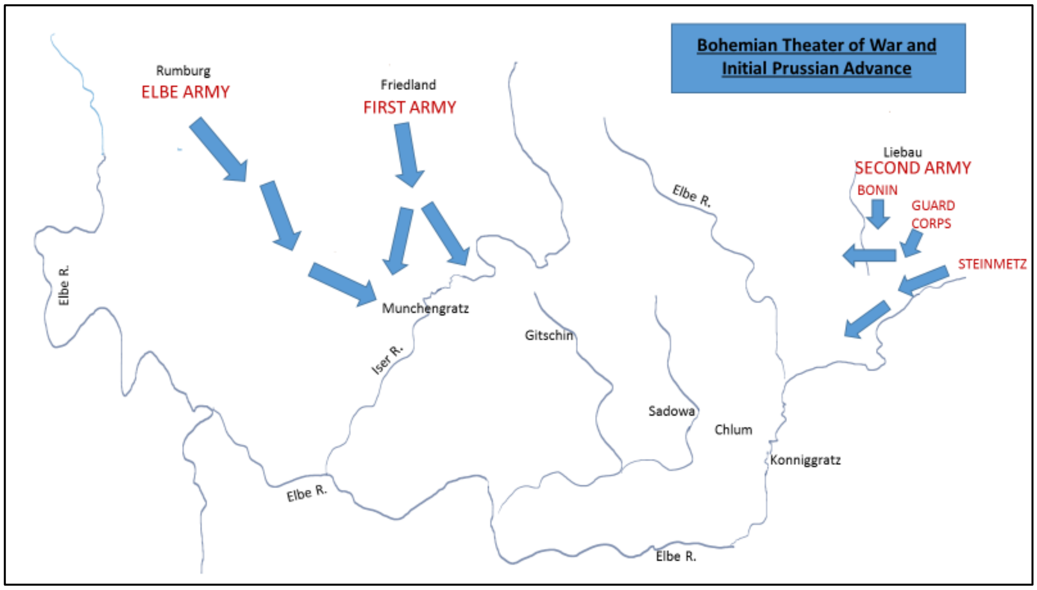
Bohemian Theater of War and Initial Prussian Advance
Rumburg
ELBE ARMY
Friedland
FIRST ARMY
Liebau
SECOND ARMY
BONIN
GUARD CORPS
STEINMETZ
Elbe R.
Elbe R.
Munchengratz
Iser R.
Gitschin
Sadowa
Chlum
Konniggratz
Elbe R.
Elbe R.

Figure 1. Initial Deployment of Prussian Forces. Source: Craig, Gordon. *The Battle of Königgrätz Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.

The events that followed made plain why Moltke married complex strategic and operational planning to highly simplistic tactical orders. While some attribute Moltke's use of *Auftragstaktik* to the current American conception of mission command, others may just as easily argue that it was instead an act of concession, a measure by which to mitigate the risk of leading commanders who did not always follow. As Citino asserts, "Moltke could advise and recommend, but he could not command."[84] While he could deftly control an idea, he had far less success controlling his commanders: a crowned prince, a prince, and a senior officer corps comprised of entitled nobles. Since he could not, he relied on the rational mind and creative "genius" (one that rarely manifested) of his subordinate commanders to make on-the-ground decisions. If rationality and genius failed, then his implementation of simple tactics that incorporated an appeal to ingrained Romantic conceptions of freedom and *Bildung* would succeed where his direct orders did not. In much of Moltke's experience, subordinate commanders rarely possessed the kind of rational mind and genius that he did and that were necessary to win wars. Therefore, his operational success resulted more frequently in his appeal to the Romantic tradition of *Bildung*.

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[84] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 163.

Moltke may not have been able to command his officers to follow directed lines of operation, but he could entice them to carry on the Prussian tradition: the cult of the offensive, which was very much in line with the traditions of Romantic biology, freedom, and *Bildung*. As Citino remarks, “It was a simple, but effective concept, that would not require much in the way of fine tuning or close control from the center, two things that Moltke felt were impossible in any event.”[85] If Moltke developed an operational strategy and initial deployment sound enough to overcome divergent, insubordinate executional strategies, then the odds of success were in his favor.

Two of the most famous acts of insubordination, specifically those committed by General Eduard von Flies at Langensalza and Crown Prince Frederick Charles at Münchengrätz, had the potential to undermine Moltke’s campaign but paradoxically contributed to its success. Initially, Moltke directed Eduard Vogel von Falckenstein’s larger force to vigorously attack the Hanoverians in Langensalza, but Falkenstein, a mediocre commander at best, did not follow the directive until Moltke secured a royal order. Having received the King’s order on 26 June 1866, Falckenstein began to mobilize and move south towards the Hanoverians. Yet before the advance was complete, General Flies, the commander of forces set to fix the enemy from a southern position, took the initiative to advance north against what he believed to be a rear guard. However, he found himself facing a force that outnumbered him two to one, 19,000 to 8,900. Flies’ force was defeated in what is seen as a relatively useless battle within the overall context of the campaign.[86] Totally disregarding Moltke’s scheme of maneuver, Flies did what Prussian leaders did best: he attacked.

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[85] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 162.

[86] Ibid., 159.

His decision to attack was “the Prussian way, dating back to the Great Elector, to attack the enemy whenever and wherever he presented himself . . . The Prussian officer was expected to attack . . . This reputation for aggression . . . kept neighboring powers in a constant state of anxiety about going to war with Prussia and made them commit errors in operations and combat once they did.”[87] Within the context of late nineteenth-century Prussian culture, this behavior was encouraged and no doubt a component of Moltke’s assertion that “no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.”[88] Certainly, Moltke had not intended for Flies to waste a large element of his force in a fight against a much larger foe, which was clearly an act of undisciplined initiative.

Historians have often regarded Flies’ attack as useless, yet the subordinate commander’s action provided time for both northern and southern elements to link up at the objective and overtake Hanoverian forces. Losses were high, but the results at the same time were positive. Moltke, through understanding the value of cultural context, specifically *Bildung*, offset the operational risk of leading subordinate commanders who privileged offensive above disciplined action. Brilliantly, he incorporated the fundamentals of Romantic biology to understand that large social bodies have agency and make unpredictable choices, especially in the fog and friction of war, but also that those unpredictable choices can be mitigated and often overcome by appealing to reflexive behaviors. In this instance, the reflexive behavior belonged to the tradition of the Prussian offensive, a strong component of which is *Bildung*, the reciprocal pattern in which individual and social growth mutually reinforce one another in the act of warfare. By anticipating the movement of his armies as single agents, developing operational plans that appealed to the core Romantic values of his subordinate commanders, and establishing multiple operational lines that converged upon the objective in what would hopefully result in (but rarely did) a *kesselschlacht*, Moltke assured mutually supportive positions regardless of who attacked first. To be sure, the attacker knew that his fellow commanders were likewise imbued with the desire to "march to the sound of the cannon,"[89] and would soon join him in the fight.

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[87] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 159.

[88] Moltke, *On the Art of War*, 92.

This same offensive spirit was a recurring theme throughout Moltke's campaigns. The following day, Crown Prince Frederick Charles took similar offensive initiative at Münchengrätz. Even though Moltke directed him to aid the Second Army in the east, Frederick Charles instead headed south with the hope of joining the Elbe Army, which was advancing from the west, and pinning Austro-Saxon forces in a *kesselschlacht.* As the tempo of both forces did not match up, no encirclement occurred. However, the Prussians still managed a victory. The superiority of the needle gun's rate of fire and the effect of the company columns, which Moltke's forces had practiced during numerous field exercises, ensured tactical success.[90] With clear and simple directives to find and destroy the enemy center of gravity, Moltke's Romantic operating framework offset risk and promised success even when subordinate commanders ignored more specific directives.

Frederick Charles took similar initiative less than a week later, and it is through this action that the Prussians began to secure campaign victory. On 2 July 1866, Fredrick Charles' cavalry serendipitously discovered the Austrian main body in Sadowa. Once again, Fredrick Charles took the initiative and planned to attack the next morning at 10:00 a.m. When Moltke received the news, he issued two orders: one to Second Army to "move with all forces against the right flank of the presumed enemy order of battle, attacking him as soon as possible," and another to Frederick Charles, directing him to attack earlier rather than later, and fix Benedek's Austrian forces until

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[89] Moltke, *On the Art of War*, 13.

[90] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 165.

Second Army arrived and destroyed them.[91] The bloody attack at Chlum Heights proceeded for several hours. In this particularly grim moment, William turned to his field marshal and despaired, “Moltke, Moltke, we are losing the battle!” Reassuring his king that all, in fact, was not lost, Moltke replied, “Your majesty will today win not only the battle but the campaign.”[92] His assurances were quickly validated, for Second Army soon thereafter exploited Austrian confusion and gained the advantage by midday. Once again, the intended *Kesselschlact* did not happen, but the Prussians nevertheless managed a victory. In appealing to ingrained notions of *Bildung,* Moltke incorporated the fundamentals of Romantic biology to mitigate the unpredictable agency of a large social body.

However, many events did not occur as planned during this short campaign. Even worse, many directives were blatantly ignored. Regardless, much of this insubordination resulted in tactical victory. Had Fredrick Charles followed Moltke’s directive on 27 June 1866 to aid Second Army, his cavalry would most likely not have been in the position to discover Benedek’s main body in Sadowa. Much of Moltke’s brilliance consisted in his implementation of *Auftragstaktik,* his issuance of clear, simple directives that embodied the offensive spirit of his age and that commanders would follow even if they ignored some of the particulars. In any scenario, commanders were driven to mass on the center of gravity, which was exactly where Moltke wanted them at Königgrätz in 1866 to achieve a clear, quick, and decisive victory in the name of German unification.

Conclusion

The Romantic movement had a profound effect on Helmuth von Moltke’s life-long world view and leadership style. He recognized that humans live in a complex and uncertain environment where information is a scarce resource. Nevertheless, in the Romantic tradition of Kant, he valued human reason and its ability to process complex information. Because he valued reason, he relied upon extensive planning to mitigate uncertainty and the decision-making abilities of other commanders to appropriately react to changes in the tactical environment. Furthermore, he trusted commanders to react to danger in the spirit of his epoch, one that valued *Bildung,* and march to the sound of the cannons. Therefore, Moltke depended upon simple, aggressive tactics that would survive unforeseen changes that naturally arose from confrontations with the sublime and appeal to the warrior ethos of his leaders, as Goethe described it. Even though Echevarria asserts that Moltke ceased to be a Romantic thinker, Moltke's campaign plans and execution techniques prove otherwise. Moltke's voice recordings likewise serve as evidence for this claim. As demonstrated, this alternative method of inquiry yields rich insights into Moltke's character and decisions, and therefore it warrants attention.

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[91] Citino, *The German Way of War*, 165.

[92] Ibid.

As postmodern complex adaptive systems theories begin to provide new insights into the way in which seemingly unimportant agents and ideas have more of an effect on campaigns than previously identified, scholarly understanding of great commanders like Moltke now benefits from the application of untraditional artistic and philosophical lenses. In this vein, scholars gain a nuanced appreciation of the interplay between art and military life, and the way in which this interplay shapes warfare. Certainly, a subsequent study of the Franco-Prussian War will reinforce the benefits of this assertion, as Moltke practiced a similar form of *Auftragstaktik*, received similar insubordinate responses from his commanders, yet managed to secure another victory despite subordinate misconduct. To fully comprehend the unparalleled achievements that scholars perceive in both of Moltke's famous campaigns, researchers must examine the nuanced relationships between culture, art, philosophy, and military life. For Moltke, German Romanticism was at the center of his identity, consciously and unconsciously shaping most of his major wartime decisions. Without an understanding of Romanticism's impact on Moltke, scholars can neither fully nor accurately appreciate his contributions.

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