Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War

Review Number:
199
Publish date:
Thursday, 31 May, 2001
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ISBN:
521791014X
Date of Publication:
2001
Publisher:
Cambridge University Press
Place of Publication:
Cambridge
Reviewer:
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Research into the origins of the First World War, like the work undertaken on most controversial historical topics, is subject, at least to some extent, to the dictates of scholarly fashion. Thus, it was that, not so long ago, much of the writing on this issue focused on the cultural factors that, it is said, predisposed the people of Europe to rush headfirst towards the precipice. The role of such amorphous ideas as personal or national honour, male desire, or even the enthusiasm for sacrifice implicit in the discordant music and jarring ballet of Stravinsky's prophetic *Frühlingsopfer* (Rite of Spring) all attracted their share of historical attention, much to the profit of our overall understanding of the roots of this conflict.(1) In recent years, however, attention has shifted away from such areas and there has emerged, instead, a considerable reawakening of interest in the possibility that it was military and strategic factors that precipitated the outbreak of war in 1914. Examples of major scholarly works in this field abound. Thus, for instance, David Herrmann and David Stevenson have both evaluated the impact that competition in armaments had on great power relations. Niall Ferguson has scrutinised the economic and fiscal bases of national armed rivalry. Jack Snyder and Stig Förster have examined the destabilising role of those military doctrines that emphasised offensive battle tactics and short wars. John Maurer has explored the place of deterrence and deterrence failure in the international system. And, in Holger Afflerbach's study of Erich von Falkenhayn, we have seen a major re-evaluation of the part played in promoting conflict by one of the key military figures of this period.(2) It is this historiographical context - viz. a growing and vibrant revitalisation of military history - which provides the backdrop to Annika Mombauer's new monograph on Helmuth von Moltke, the younger. It is against this rich literature that her work on Imperial Germany's last peacetime Chief of the Great General Staff and first military leader of the Great War must be located and evaluated.

It should be clearly stated at the very outset that, while the field of military history in which Dr Mombauer's study is situated is a growing one - possibly even becoming a crowded one - this in no way detracts from the fact that hers is a book of the utmost importance. To some extent, this reflects the nature of her topic. The younger Moltke is a figure just crying out for systematic study and careful re-evaluation. For, notwithstanding the importance of his position as the strategic head of Europe's most influential military power, his career has not been subject to the detailed investigations that have been made of his more colourful or illustrious contemporaries. Indeed, he has generally been marginalised by historians, many of whom have all too readily accepted the negative portrait of Moltke painted after his death by those of his fellow generals looking to find a scapegoat for Germany's failure to win a quick victory in the First World War. Accordingly, in much of the literature Moltke is depicted as an unremarkable man and as a weak and ineffectual leader, whose main contribution to German national life was to undermine his country's chances of military success in 1914. So pervasive has been this trend that, in recent years, only Arden Bucholz has offered any new insights into Moltke's performance as a military commander. However, as this was done as part of a broader study of the Prussian Great General Staff and its work across several decades, Bucholz's book could not - and, indeed, did not - single out Moltke for special examination.(3) Thus, in producing this new monograph - a study that focuses solely and exclusively on Moltke and his role - Dr Mombauer has remedied this glaring deficiency in the historical literature.

Yet, the fact that she has produced a forensic study of a neglected figure, would not, in itself, make her book so remarkable, were it not for the fact that her research relentlessly undermines most of the existing preconceptions that surround her principal subject. If historians have generally ignored the younger Moltke in the past on the grounds of his lack of influence, Dr Mombauer's findings will certainly ensure that he receives a good deal more attention in the future. For, she proves quite conclusively that Moltke was not the inconsequential figure that we have generally been led to believe. On the contrary, the Chief of the Great General Staff possessed considerable influence over Kaiser Wilhelm II and was also able to impress his views strongly upon several leading civilian politicians in Germany's so-called 'responsible government', such as Imperial Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and State Secretary at the Foreign Office Gottlieb von Jagow.

Moreover, that he had access to such people and was able to exercise his powers of persuasion upon them was no trivial matter because, as Dr Mombauer conclusively shows, Moltke was an ardent warmonger determined to ensure that Germany resorted to the *ultima ratio regis* at the very earliest suitable occasion. Consequently, he took full advantage of his proximity to both the Kaiser and the Chancellor repeatedly to proffer military information and specialist advice that was geared to persuading them that the policy of the German Reich should be to engineer a European war as soon as possible. To this end, during his tenure of office, and particularly in the years from 1912 to 1914, he ceaselessly informed them that the armaments programmes of Germany's enemies were such that, while the Reich was in a favourable position to back up its foreign policy by a resort to arms *at that time*, after 1916 this could no longer be done with any guarantee of success. War, if it were to come, he insisted, had to come immediately, while it was still likely to end in a German victory. Wait too long - even as short a span as two years - and Germany would be vulnerable to its enemies and unable to enforce its demands. This was a message that, as Dr Mombauer demonstrates, had a telling effect on German foreign policy, especially in the summer of 1914.

And yet, it was not the mere fact that he was pushing for war that makes Moltke interesting, so much as the fact that he advocated a conflict in defiance of his own fears about the likely outcome of such hostilities. For, while Moltke proclaimed the need for an immediate resort to arms loudly and repeatedly to the senior policymakers in the German government, it is, nevertheless, quite clear from Dr Mombauer's work that he actually harboured very considerable doubts about the validity of the advice that he was giving. Despite all of his professions that Germany had to go to war soon because the 'favourable' military circumstances in which the Reich then found itself would inevitably fade away, the Chief of the Great General Staff nevertheless expected the coming war, even if it were to be launched immediately, to be a long and arduous one. Indeed, he was painfully conscious that in an age of 'people's wars', conflict between great powers pitted not only armies, but entire populations and economies against each other, had the potential to lead the

combatants to financial ruin, and would almost certainly be of prolonged duration. Yet, he never shared this knowledge with Germany's civilian politicians, even though he was aware that they expected a future European war to last months rather than years. Moreover, this decision to keep his fears to himself was a deliberate one, for he knew full well that Germany's political leaders would only accept his logic about the desirability of war if they were unaware of what the reality entailed. Such was the 'criminal irresponsibility' of his actions: he promoted a war that he was far from certain could be won by deliberately creating false expectations of the likely outcome.

As a result of all the evidence that she has uncovered - and it must be acknowledged that the archival base of this study is very impressive - it is none too surprising that Dr Mombauer concludes that the younger Moltke played a significant part in causing the First World War. It was, after all, his misleading expert advice and constant badgering that created the strong belief among German leaders that war was a viable option that they had to seize in the here and now or forego forever. As Kurt Riezler, the chancellor's private secretary, recorded retrospectively in 1915 (p.212): 'Bethmann can blame the coming of the war . on the answer that Moltke gave him.. He did say yes! We would succeed.' This is not to absolve the Reich's political leadership from their share of responsibility for the war. As Dr Mombauer acknowledges, many of them were inherently receptive to Moltke's message and took little convincing that war should not be shirked in 1914. Yet, whether they would have taken this view if Moltke had shared with them his expectations of the nature of the coming war is another matter. By never making his fears known to them, he ensured that German foreign policy never had to be formulated in the cold light of day.

Where does this leave the historiography on the origins of the First World War? Dr Mombauer's book offers copious new grounds for believing that the war was started principally by actions taken in Berlin, many of them by a man whose role has previously been rather downplayed. In this light, the marginalization of Moltke is, clearly, no longer tenable. Rather, it must be acknowledged that Moltke was a major figure in Germany's decision-making elite, whose influence, unfortunately, was far reaching. In particular, he did everything that he conceivably could to make war likely and, in the end, sadly for Germany and Europe, succeeded. On this point, the evidence that Dr Mombauer has collected is unambiguous and utterly compelling.

Her material also suggests a number of refinements need to be made to some existing theories about the background to the war. Niall Ferguson's recent suggestion, for example, that there was too little militarism in Germany before 1914 and that larger German army increases would have made the Reich leadership feel more secure and less inclined to war does not seem likely given Dr Mombauer's profile of Moltke's *Weltanschauung*. As she says (p. 180), it is more plausible that 'increased spending would only have made them more confident and bellicose, and hence precipitated war even sooner.' In a different vein, her research (esp. pp. 100-5) suggests that it might be worth looking again at Adolf Gasser's ideas on the scrapping of the eastern deployment plan (*Grosse Ostaufmarsch*), as her material offers some confirmation of his notion that this action shows that a decision against prolonged peace had been taken in 1912/13.

This is not the only area in which the book makes some interesting contributions to existing debates. Despite the fact that the title suggests that the scope of the work is confined to the origins of the war, the study actually continues into the early war years. Thus, in addition to assessing Moltke's contribution to the military outcome to the July Crisis, Dr Mombauer also evaluates his part in the failure of the so-called Schlieffen plan. This is, of course, an old controversy, but Dr Mombauer is, nevertheless, able to bring a genuinely fresh eye to it. Starting from the premise that there was a Schlieffen plan, Terrance Zuber's recent claims notwithstanding (4) that it was Moltke's job to update this plan on a regular basis, that his revisions made sense in the light of the changing circumstances of the European military scene, and that Moltke's actions reflected the fact that he was not a victim of the 'short war illusion', she is able to provide a more balanced perspective to the German reverse at the Marne. This result, which played a major part in ensuring that the First World War would be a prolonged 'total war', was in many respects the culmination of all of Moltke's fears. Once again, however, this fact merely serves to place his actions in pushing so strenuously for war into the sharpest relief.

In conclusion, this study makes a very significant contribution to the scholarship on both Wilhelmine Germany and the military pre-history of the Great War. In the current state of research, it is clearly the definitive statement on the role and career of the younger Moltke as Chief of the Great General Staff. I suspect that it will remain as such for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Avner Offer, 'Going to War in 1914: A Matter of Honour?', *Politics and Society*, 23 (1995); Michael C.C. Adams, *The Great Adventure: Male Desire and the Coming of World War I* (Bloomington, 1990); Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London, 1989).Back to (1)
2. David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, 1996); David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe 1904-1914* (Oxford, 1996); Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London, 1998); Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca & London, 1984); Stig Förster, 'Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos', *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, 54 (1995); John H. Maurer, *The Outbreak of the First World War: Strategic Planning, Crisis Decision Making, and Deterrence Failure* (Westport, CT, 1995); Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn. Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich, 1994).Back to (2)
3. Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning* (Providence & Oxford, 1993).Back to (3)
4. Terrence Zuber, 'The Schlieffen Plan Reconsidered', *War in History*, 6 (1999).Back to (4)

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