

The Modern Model of the Battlefield Tour and Staff Ride: Post-1815 Prussian and German Traditions¹

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At the end of the Second World War, the Historical Division of the Foreign Military Studies Branch, U.S. Army, Europe, commissioned a number of Military Review studies on pre-war enemy preparations and wartime operations. One study examined the function and conduct of “War Games” (*Kriegsspiele*) within the German Army.³ The principal author of the study was General der Infanterie Rudolf Michael Hofmann. Several first-class experts on German training also contributed to the study, including General Hans von Greiffenberg, General Fangher, Feldmarschall List, General Praun, and Generaloberst Franz Halder. The U.S. Army wanted to know what types of war games had been conducted by the German Army before and during the Second World War, and whether or not these exercises had fulfilled their purposes as training devices. It was an ambitious project; in the German Army of the 1914–1945 period, the term “war game” was applied rather liberally to cover a wide range of training exercises that included war games proper, map exercises, staff exercises, training trips, tactical walks, command post exercises, sand-table exercises, battlefield tours, and staff rides. Some *Kriegsspiele* were based on hypothetical scenarios while others made extensive use of historical records and included long visits to the actual sites of past battles and campaigns. Given their diversity and their large variety of objectives, were war games—and in particular battlefield tours and staff rides—an effective means for testing new ideas of command, and good preparation for future operations? The Germans clearly believed that they were.

Kriegsspiele, in their various guises, had been a core component of officer training in the Prussian army since before the Napoleonic Wars. They were equally important throughout the nineteenth century and, as such, they featured prominently in the education and professional development of the officer corps in the Imperial Army of von Moltke, and subsequently von Schlieffen. After 1918, the German Army reconfirmed its faith in war games; first the Reichswehr and after 1935 the Wehrmacht were firmly convinced of the great importance of these theoretical exercises to the training of their officers and to the operational effectiveness of the army as a whole. Even after ignominious defeat in 1945, General

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³ General Rudolf M. Hofmann, *War Games* MS # P-094. Trans. P. Luetzkendorf, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, 1952.

Halder, never one to shy away from an opportunity to engage in a little self-congratulatory hubris, concluded his foreword to *War Games* by writing: “The acknowledged high standards of German officer training and the frequent successes of carefully prepared German operations are proofs of the high value of the war game.”⁴ In fact, merely by commissioning a study on German war games, the American army had conferred on both the games and their creators the high degree of status that many senior German army officers fully believed was deserved.

The modern concept of war games—historical studies and practical exercises aimed at improving the professional standards of officers and army alike—is believed to have had its origins in the seventeenth century with the development of the “military chess game,” an adaptation of regular chess that incorporated contemporary interest in mathematical principles and emphasized their relationship to strategy and tactics. Innovative though it was, the game was also severely limited by the rigid characteristics of the chessboard. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the military writer and tactician Georg Venturini transferred the game to a chart or map and thus began the development of the modern chartex and mapex, both regular features of staff college courses today.⁵

Battlefield tours, staff rides, tactical walks, and the serious study of military history all became features of officer training in the Prussian Army of Frederick the Great. Even at age 22, then an inexperienced and un-blooded Colonel, Frederick appreciated how essential professional education was to an effective and efficient army. He was, after all, not only the Crown Prince of Prussia but also a willing child of the Enlightenment. Frederick read the history of his predecessors, of the rulers and the armies of Prussia. He analyzed their successes and failures and identified the reasons for them. He also conducted personal battlefield tours and tactical walks, often searching out old veterans who could describe to him the battles that they had fought. Further encouragement for these activities came from his father, King Frederick William, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Armies, Prince Eugen of Savoy. On a number of occasions, Eugen advised the young Frederick to “read military history . . . to meditate unceasingly on your profession and on the operations of great generals . . . and always to keep the great objectives of a campaign in view.” The pupil heeded the instructions of his tutor and, later, when the student became King and Commander he in turn implored his own officers to dedicate themselves to the profession of arms through personal study of the art of war.⁶

Frederick took immense interest in training the army. In 1743, after the First Silesian War (War of the Austrian Succession, 1740–1748), he inaugurated and

⁴ Generaloberst Franz Halder, “Foreword,” in Hofmann, *War Games* MS # P-094.

⁵ G. Venturini, *Beschreibung und Regeln eines neuen Kriegs-Spiels* (Schleswig, 1798) and *War Games* MS # P-094, xiv.

⁶ David Fraser, *Frederick the Great* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2000), 44, 48-50; Nicholas Henderson, *Prince Eugen of Savoy* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964).

personally directed large-scale autumn maneuvers of all arms. Eighteenth-century battles were won by precision maneuver and firepower. Frederick knew this and, through rigorous and regular formation drill and field training, he ensured that his army achieved tactical mobility, steadfastness under fire, and complete responsiveness to command.⁷ Equally important to the army's success was the training of commanders. Hard-earned battle experience moved Frederick to formalize the education and training of his officer corps. A cadet school was established in Berlin along with two smaller feeder schools in East Prussia (Culm and Stolp). Regular officers received lectures on geography and fortifications during the winter months, followed by tactical rides and war games in spring and summer. This increase in intellectual activity was not to the liking of many of Frederick's senior officers, who viewed it to be frightfully bourgeois and demeaning. "If experience were all a great general needs," Frederick remonstrated, "the greatest would be Prince Eugene's mules."⁸ Ignoring their displeasure, Frederick persisted with his efforts to improve the professional skills of his key officers. Gifted commanders were often assembled for study days and staff rides. Frederick encouraged them to study "the ground." During staff rides he questioned them on how they would attack or defend the position just reconnoitered; then their solutions were discussed. Finally, he urged them to teach themselves at all times. "When walking or riding, estimate distance, judge it. Then measure it."⁹

With the advent of the French Revolution, and the expanding demands of mass armies and warfare that was increasingly technical (heavy artillery, engineers), the personal philosophy and traditions of the Great Soldier-King were no longer sufficient for the Prussian army to meet future challenges successfully. Colonel Christian von Massenbach was one of the first Prussian officers to call for major reforms. Between 1802 and 1803, he wrote four memoirs for Frederick William III, outlining improved training courses for officers and his desire to see staff training formalized in an advanced school for commanding officers.¹⁰ These were radical ideas at the time, perhaps too radical, because the combination of a cult of reverence for all things Frederician and the dead hand of tradition (as a means

⁷ R. R. Palmer, "Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War," in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 95–99; Fraser, 126–129. Frederick's operational doctrine is summarized clearly and concisely in W. von Bremen, *Friedrich der Grosse* (Berlin: B. Behr's Verlag, 1905). See also Dennis Showalter, *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (London: Longman, 1995).

⁸ Karl Demeter, *The German Officer-Corps in Society and State, 1650–1945*, trans. Angus Malcolm (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1965), 67.

⁹ Steven E. Clemente, *For King and Kaiser! The Making of the Prussian Army Officer, 1860-1914* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 3–4; Fraser, 129–130. See also *Military Instruction from the late King of Prussia to his Generals* trans. (from the French) Major T. W. Forster (Shelborne and London: printed by William Cruttwell, 1797).

¹⁰ William O. Shanahan, *Prussian Military Reforms 1786-1813* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1966) 72–73.

to future glory and success) proved too inert to overcome. All this changed in the autumn of 1806 with the Prussian army's comprehensive defeats in the twin battles of Jena and Auerstadt. Proud, perhaps arrogant, and definitely ignorant of the changing nature of warfare since 1792, the well-drilled but dated Prussian Army marched to its destruction blithely unaware that its tactical system was cumbersome and rigid, and that in its present form it had no place on the lively and violent battlefields now owned by Napoleon.¹¹

Reforms followed quickly. In July 1807, Frederick William III created a Military Reorganization Commission headed by Graf Karl von Lottum and Major General Gerhard von Scharnhorst. Under their direction, places on the Commission were filled with a mixture of reactionaries and visionaries, including Generals Hermann von Boyen and Count August Neithardt von Gneisenau, Major Karl von Grolman, and a young captain of artillery, Karl von Clausewitz. The commissioners set about adapting the Prussian army to the new style of warfare. They re-organized the army, eventually adopting an independent brigade system. New measures were introduced, such as the "Krümper" system, for handling reserves and quickly increasing the army's size. Military justice was re-organized, as was the whole system of logistics. On Christmas Day, 1808, the Prussian War Ministry was founded, and roughly four years later new official training regulations were issued.¹² The exigencies of war had also convinced the reformers that a better educated and more technically proficient officer corps was required. As a result, a number of new cadet and military schools (Artillery and Engineering, Inspection Schools, Cadet Schools, and the Potsdam School for military orphans) were established. In addition to these schools, the Universal War School, the only army-wide educational institution, was founded in 1810.¹³

It was Scharnhorst and Clausewitz who first advocated the founding of a war academy (*Kriegsakademie*). They wanted a technical school, modeled on the German polytechnic academy (*technische Hochschule*), to teach officers subjects directly relevant to their profession. Another group of influential senior officers argued against this narrow model, advocating instead a school established on the Humboldtian tradition of the German university. General Rühle von Lilienstern, the first director of the War Academy, embraced the humanist traditions of a broad-based university education. Accordingly, during its early years, the War Academy emphasized the study of history, mathematics, philosophy, and physics

¹¹ David Nash, *The Prussian Army 1801-1815* (London: Almark Publishing Co. Ltd., 1972), 5; and Shanahan, 232.

¹² Hajo Holborn, "The Prusso-German School: Moltke and the Rise of the General Staff" in Paret, ed., 281-284; and Nash, 5-14.

¹³ Daniel Hughes, *The King's Finest. A Social and Bureaucratic Profile of Prussia's General Officers, 1871-1914* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1987), 83; and Louis A. von Scharfenort, *Die königlich preussische Kriegsakademie* (Berlin: E.S. Mittler and Son, 1910), 2-4. The General or Universal War School (*Allgemeine Kriegsschule*) opened in Berlin on October 15, 1810. In 1859, the army renamed the school the War Academy (*Kriegsakademie*).

over the purely military parts of the curriculum.¹⁴ The military arts of topographical studies, tactics, and strategy were not, however, forgotten. Scharnhorst was the Minister of War, and he was responsible for the peacetime education and training of the army. Moreover, he discharged his duty by training the officer corps in war games and staff maneuvers.¹⁵ While the army and its education and training, were modernized through the post-1806 reforms, the old Frederician tradition of officers reading history and then taking their theoretical studies outdoors in the form of staff rides and war games continued, albeit in an institutionalized format.

The seemingly inherent tensions between narrow professionalism and a liberal education were a constant source of concern for the Prussian and subsequently the German army throughout the nineteenth century and the first 45 years of the twentieth. The struggle was one between the practical and the theoretical, with the former slowly gaining the ascendancy as armies became larger and war became more technical. Not surprisingly, within the army there was a tendency to emphasize training that promoted the outlook of the specialist rather than the broad view of the generalist. Indicative of this trend was the increasing emphasis placed on military subjects at the War Academy. Between 1866 and 1870, the head of the War Academy, General Eduard von Peucker, rationalized the curriculum, adding more obligatory military courses at the expense of a more general education. In 1872, the War Academy came under the direct supervision of the Chief of the General Staff.¹⁶

Military history became another direct responsibility of the General Staff, not only in terms of using it to teach strategy and tactics, but also the writing of it. Historical study provided officers, particularly those who lacked actual battle experience, with a realistic if vicarious picture of the complexities of war. Taught and written properly (the stated intention of the General Staff), military history was also thought to offer an objective description of past problems that could be analyzed in order to draw from them valid practical conclusions. The rationale for studying military history was obvious: it provided “lessons for the future.” Accordingly, history became an applied art, and at the War Academy instruction followed the new applicatory method, emphasizing practical exercises and allowing more active student participation.¹⁷

¹⁴ von Scharfenort, Chapter 1; and Hughes, 83–85.

¹⁵ Holborn, 283.

¹⁶ Hughes, 85; and Bernard Schwertfeger, *Die grossen Erzieher des Heeres* (Potsdam: Rütten und Loening, 1936), 32, 47.

¹⁷ *The Role of Military History in Officer Education in Great Britain, the United States of America and Germany in the Twentieth Century*. Report commissioned by the Ministry of Defence, UK, and produced by the Department of War Studies, King’s College London (October 1983–1984), 247–249, 252; Friedrich A. J. von Bernhardt, *Denkwürdigkeiten aus meinem Leben nach gleichzeitigen Aufzeichnungen und im Lichte der Erinnerung* (Berlin, 1927); Herbert Rosinski, *The German Army* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), 165; Holborn, 290; and Hughes, 85.

Both Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and Alfred von Schlieffen were keen students of history.¹⁸ Both also favored the practical application of historical knowledge to the many challenges of war over a more philosophical approach, such as that practiced by Clausewitz not that many years earlier. Rejecting theoretical speculation, Moltke embraced military history “as a tool to forearm staff officers against the many possible contingencies.” Schlieffen, on the other hand, had an even narrower outlook. He took the “technician’s view,” and used history to formulate and test his strategic conceptions. History clearly had developed a symbiotic relationship with practice. Each year, the General Staff’s plans for operations were tested in military maneuvers, staff rides, and war games. Officer education as well increasingly became a mixture of applied theoretical instruction and the adaptation of this knowledge to practical experience. During the quarter century before the outbreak of the First World War, instruction at the War Academy focused on professional military subjects, namely leadership, field tactics, general staff work, and map reading. General education, such as it was, included instruction in geography, history, and philosophy. War or battle history (*Wehr-Geschichte*) was ranked just below tactics in the order of priority, and all students read military history, spending six hours a week on the subject during their first year and four per week in the subsequent two. Lessons learned in the classroom in the winter were expanded upon and even tested during staff rides and tactical walks in spring and summer.¹⁹ Again, the emphasis was on learning tactics and refining the skills deemed necessary to carry out specific operational tasks.²⁰

Defeat in 1918 and the strictures of the Versailles Treaty imposed a number of changes on the German army (the General Staff and all former military educational institutions were abolished). What officer education and training that still was allowed was decentralized within existing civilian establishments and military units and directed under the auspices of the Army Office (*Heeresleitung*). These changes in outward form, however, were not accompanied by radical alterations to the three-year staff officers’ course of the old War Academy. Under the expert guidance of General Hans von Seeckt and, after 1926, his close advisor General Wilhelm Heye,²¹ officer education in the Reichswehr took on renewed

¹⁸ Moltke was chief of the general staff from 1857 to 1887; Schlieffen, Moltke’s eventual successor, occupied the post from 1891 to 1906. Together, their views dominated Prusso-German military thought from the mid-nineteenth century to the First World War and beyond. See Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment,” in Paret, ed., 296–325. See also Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning* (Providence, R.I.: Berg Publishers, 1991), and Robert T. Foley, “Schlieffen’s Last Kriegsspiel,” *War Studies Journal* 3:2 (Summer 1998), 117–133, and 4:1 (Summer 1999), 97–115.

¹⁹ Hansgeorg Model, *Der deutsche Generalstabsoffizier. Seine Auswahl und Ausbildung in Reichswehr, Wehrmacht und Bundeswehr* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1968).

²⁰ *The Role of Military History in Officer Education*, 247–255.

²¹ General Hans von Seeckt was commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr from 1920 to 1926. His

vigor yet also retained its Prussian continuity. Seeckt re-emphasized the role of military history in the teaching of tactical awareness and acumen. But he added to this the need for character training (*Charakterbildung*) and improved self-reliance amongst his officers. Physical and spiritual strength was seen as being as, if not more, important than intellectual knowledge or skill. Inculcating spirit, *Furor Teutonicus*, was an idea that enjoyed considerable currency in German military education during the interwar years, particularly in the Wehrmacht throughout the Nazi period.²² Decisive training took place in the open spaces of the outdoor classroom, in the form of maneuvers, tactical walks, staff rides, and even sport. Theoretical knowledge obtained through formal lecturers, personal reading, and seminars substituted for a lack of personal experience of command in battle. Military history was also viewed favorably as a way to promote the old values of the victorious nineteenth-century army.²³

During the first year of the three-year Reichswehr course, student officers dealt with several tactical situations, first at the level of the infantry regiment and later at the divisional level. The assignments stressed tactics and the combined arms concept, and staff solutions were provided. Both hypothetical and historical scenarios were used, the latter being drawn from anywhere from the campaigns of Frederick the Great to the First World War. Much was made of the boldness and imagination demonstrated by the great commanders. Tactical rides were central to all staff training, and they were used to illustrate theoretical lessons and to test an officer's ability to solve problems independently. Rides, normally done on horseback, consisted of ten to twenty students along with their instructors. Towards the end of the Weimar period, some rides were conducted from motor vehicles.²⁴ The first-year course ended in the spring with two instructional staff rides of some considerable importance. Each student was evaluated on his character and his effort, with only the best being invited back to attend the second-year course.²⁵

Year two continued the process of tactical instruction (with an emphasis on division-sized forces). Problems focusing on logistics and special branches of the

successor, General Wilhelm Heye, held the post from October 1926 to October 1930. See James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg. Hans von Seeckt and German military reforms* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992) and Martin Kitchen, "The Army and the Weimar Republic," *idem. A Military History of Germany* (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1975), 235-280.

²² Prof. Dr. Hans W. Ziegler, "*Wehrerziehung im neuen Geiste*" (n.d.) Special Collections, McMaster University Archives, 8-10; for a scholarly account of the development of the warrior spirit in the Prusso-German army, see Antulio J. Echevarria II, "On the Brink of the Abyss: The Warrior Identity and German Military Thought before the Great War" *War & Society* 13:2 (October 1995), 23-40.

²³ *The Role of Military History in Officer Education*, 257-266.

²⁴ Karl Wilhelm Thilo, "Generalstabsreisen" *Wehrkunde* 13 (1964), 516-520.

²⁵ David Spires, *Image and Reality. The Making of the German Officer, 1921-1933* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 41-42. For a description of the Reichswehr training program, see Wiegand Schmidt-Richberg, *Die Generalstäbe in Deutschland 1871-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962), 55-72.

army were also introduced, as were tactical rides, or visits, to naval establishments and industrial sites. More emphasis was placed on leadership skills and personal responsibility and, once again, military subjects dominated the curriculum. Three theoretical combat exercises—a map planning exercise (*Planübung*), a war game, and a terrain evaluation (*Geländesprechung*)—were introduced to test the students with more challenging tactical problems. The year ended in late spring with two staff rides. The first, conducted in May, examined an officer's character, personality, and performance (in this order of importance). The second took place in June, but only included those officers selected by the Reichswehr Training Section. Those deemed to have excelled were invited back for the third-year course.²⁶

The third-year course (*Lehrgang R*), like years one and two, was a mix of instructional staff rides supplemented by theoretical instruction. It began with a five-day "welcome ride," which set the tone for the rest of the course. Autumn, winter, and major staff rides in the spring built on the year's theoretical lessons as well as on a critical re-assessment of the mistakes made in the previous year's instructional rides. The rides were a primary means for disseminating new tactical/technical information in a practical setting. They also served to promote uniformity and reduce parochialism. Each officer also prepared four major theoretical assignments: a terrain evaluation, a war game, a maneuver plan (*Manöveranlage*), and a military history seminar (*Kriegsgeschichtlicher Vortrag*). Again, tactical operations were emphasized, with operational history substituting for operational training. In Jodl's (General Alfred Jodl) course, in 1929–1930, for his military history question he was asked, "How could the strategy of annihilation have been achieved in the battle of Gumbinnen in 1914?"²⁷

Students taking staff college course were not the only officers to benefit from the staff ride experience. Regimental officers organized their own rides on a regular basis. Divisional staff and the Defense Ministry also ran annual staff rides in the spring, as did the commander-in-chief, whose ride (*Führerreise*) was reminiscent of those conducted by Frederick the Great many years ago. These rides contributed to the strategic and tactical conceptions of the army, provided vicarious battle experience for those without actual experience, and screened officers for promotion. They also emphasized the glories of the Prussian past. None of these activities, however, were new innovations unique to the Reichswehr system of officer development, although von Seeckt is correctly recognized for having developed them into a fine art.²⁸

Tactical and instructional staff rides were designed to familiarize officers with larger tactical situations in different types of terrain and to promote tactical uniformity in the army. If there was one inherent danger in these rides, particularly as

²⁶ Spires, 43.

²⁷ Spires, 43–44.

²⁸ Spires, 103–104; *The Role of Military History in Officer Education*, 292.

teaching aids, it was their susceptibility to conformity in thought and action, ultimately leading to dogma instead of doctrine, and resulting in rigidity of method. General Werner von Blomberg, chief of the *Truppenamt*, was alive to this danger, and he initiated steps to counter its worst effects. He encouraged more individual initiative and freedom in decision-making (within the common framework of the army's methods and practice). Blomberg also recognized other tangible benefits to be had from his recommendations. Increased individual responsibility for officers would help to develop a higher degree of motivation (*Dienstfrendigkeit*) within the officer corps, which in turn would complement and enhance both individual and collective technical competence.²⁹

From the late nineteenth century onwards, other nations, particularly Britain and the United States, used battlefield tours and staff rides to train military officers.³⁰ A decade or so before the First World War, the Staff College at Camberley added an annual battlefield tour to its program. Most of the 1870 battlefields were visited, as was Waterloo. In the U.S., Army staff rides became popular teaching aids immediately after the Civil War, although they were not added to the Fort Leavenworth curriculum until 1905. And at West Point, in 1902, Professor Gustave G. Fieberger introduced battlefield tours to his basic course in military history, noting their illustrative value and how they convinced his students of the practical benefits to be had from reading military history. Battlefield tours and staff rides contributed to the formulation of strategic and tactical concepts at King's College London and the Joint Services Command and Staff College, UK; lessons could be identified, learned, and possibly even applied in future conflicts. They also had deeper cultural and emotional benefits. Battlefield tours were used to instill a sense of duty and reverence and as such were a valuable aid in developing *esprit de corps*. These many attributes, however, have not always been appreciated. The term "battlefield tour" quickly comes to mind, and point to frequent criticisms of "foreign jollies" had at the sovereign's, or the government's, expense. While battlefield tours and staff rides are not panaceas for effective officer development and training, to write them off as frivolous extras seems equally incongruous. Their practical application to military education aside, battlefield tours and staff rides have offered other tangible benefits of extraordinary value, in terms of national consciousness, continuity, and pride for both civilians and the military alike. The origins of battlefield tours and staff rides are German, but the modern model seen in practice today is distinctly more multinational.

²⁹ Spires, 34–35.

³⁰ *The Role of Military History in Officer Education*, 284–288.

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