

Essay of 1871

“On Strategy” (*Über Strategie*)

Helmuth Graf von Moltke

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Translated and Edited by **Kerem Uysal**

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Prefatory Note (*Vorbemerkung*)

The following essay by Field Marshal Count von Moltke, “On Strategy” (*Ueber Strategie*), was written shortly after the War of 1870/71 and is preserved in the original in the War Archive of the Great General Staff in Berlin; it was already partially utilized on page 72 of the first part of the General Staff history of the Franco-German War, published in 1872, and was furthermore printed in full in 1890 in Issue 13 of the *Military Historical Monographs* (*Kriegsgeschichtliche Einzelschriften*).

Despite its repeated publication, this treatise could not be omitted where the aim is to bring together all those more or less theoretical writings of General von Moltke from which the development of his conception of war and warfare, from the beginning of his tenure as Chief of the General Staff to the zenith of his activity as a commander, can be discerned.

Essay of 1871: “On Strategy”

Policy makes use of war for the attainment of its purposes; it exerts a decisive influence upon the beginning and the end of a war, in such a manner that it reserves to itself the right, during the course of the conflict, either to increase its demands or to content itself with a lesser success.

Given this uncertainty, strategy can always direct its efforts only toward the highest goal that the available means make attainable at all. In this way it best serves the hand of policy, working solely for the purpose of policy, yet completely independent of it in action.

The immediate task of strategy is the preparation of the means of combat, the initial deployment (*Aufmarsch*) of the army. Here the most varied political, geographical, and

administrative considerations come into account. A mistake in the original assembly of the armies can scarcely be made good again throughout the entire course of the campaign. Yet these arrangements can be weighed long in advance and—assuming the combat readiness of the troops and the organization of the transport system— they must unfailingly lead to the intended result.

Matters stand differently with the further task of strategy: the military employment of the prepared means, that is to say, in operations.

Here our own will very soon encounters the independent will of the adversary. We can indeed restrict the latter if we are ready and resolved to seize the initiative, yet we cannot break it otherwise than through the means of tactics, through combat.

The material and moral consequences of every major engagement, however, are of so far-reaching a nature that through them a completely altered situation is usually created, forming a new basis for new measures. No plan of operations extends with any degree of certainty beyond the first encounter with the main force of the enemy. Only the layman believes that he can perceive in the course of a campaign the consistent execution of an original idea conceived in advance, considered in every detail, and adhered to right up to the end.

Certainly the commander will keep his grand objectives steadfastly in view, undeterred therein by the vicissitudes of events, yet the paths by which he hopes to reach them can never be established far in advance with certainty. Throughout the entire course of the campaign he is compelled to take a series of decisions on the basis of situations that cannot be foreseen. All successive acts of war are therefore not premeditated executions, but spontaneous acts, guided by military judgment (*Takt*). Everything depends, in a series of individual cases, upon penetrating the state of affairs shrouded in the fog of uncertainty, properly appraising what is given, divining what is unknown, reaching a decision swiftly, and then carrying it out vigorously and unswervingly.

To the calculation involving one known and one unknown magnitude— one’s own will and the will of the enemy— there are added still third factors that completely elude all foresight: weather, illnesses, and railway accidents, misunderstandings and illusions, in short, all those influences which one may call chance, fate, or higher providence, which man neither creates nor controls.

And yet warfare has not on that account fallen prey to blind arbitrariness. A calculus of probability would have to show that all those contingencies have ultimately worked just as often to the detriment or advantage of the one side as of the other, and the commander who in each individual case orders, if not the very best, then at least what is sensible, always retains the prospect of reaching his goal.

It is self-evident that theoretical knowledge does not suffice for this, but that here the qualities of mind and of character attain free practical, artistic expression— schooled, to be sure, by military training and guided by experience, whether drawn from military history or from life itself.

Concerning the reputation of a commander, to be sure, success decides above all else. How much of it is his true merit is extraordinarily difficult to determine. Against the irresistible force of circumstances even the best man founders, and by it the mediocre man is borne along just as often. Yet in the long run good fortune mostly stays only with the capable.

If now in war, from the start of operations onward, everything is uncertain except what the commander carries within himself in will and energy, then general doctrines for strategy, rules derived from them, and systems built upon them can impossibly possess any practical value.

Archduke Charles, it is true, declares¹ strategy to be a science and tactics to be an art. He assigns to the “science of the supreme commanders” the task of “determining the course of military enterprises,” whereas art has merely to execute the strategic designs.

General von Clausewitz, by contrast, says:² “Strategy is the use of the engagement for the purpose of the war,” and indeed strategy affords tactics the means to fight and the probability of victory through the direction of the armies and their meeting upon the battlefield. On the other hand, however, it also appropriates the success of every engagement and builds further upon it. Before the tactical victory, the demand of strategy falls silent; it adapts itself to the newly created situation.

Strategy is a system of expedients (*System der Aushülfen*). It is more than science; it is the transfer of knowledge to practical life, the continued development of the original guiding idea in accordance with constantly changing circumstances; it is the art of acting under the pressure of the most difficult conditions.

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¹Archduke Charles, *Selected Military Writings* (*Ausgewählte militärische Schriften*), annotated by Frhr. v. Waldstätten; p. 57; edition of 1881.

²Clausewitz, *On War* (*Vom Kriege*). Part One, Book Three, Strategy. p. 155; edition of 1867.