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"Moltke and His Generals: A Study in Leadership (Book Review)" by Quintin Barry

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Quintin Barry. *Moltke and His Generals: A Study in Leadership*. Solihull, UK: Helion & Company Limited, 2015. Pp. 304.

Quintin Barry's quest in writing *Moltke and His Generals* is to reveal that the infamous Chief of the Prussian General Staff's successes were not only due to his "far-sighted strategic planning, the comprehensive reorganization of the General Staff, and the grasp of new technologies," but also because of his leadership (p. i). Present-day military leaders frequently refer to Moltke's oft-used description of the officer corps. Arguably codified and articulated by Field Marshall Erich von Manstein, a Second World War commander in Nazi Germany's vaunted Wehrmacht, this value matrix surmises that:

There are only four types of officer. First, there are the lazy, stupid ones. Leave them alone, they do no harm...Second, there are the hard-working, intelligent ones. They make excellent staff officers, ensuring that every detail is properly considered. Third, there are the hard-working, stupid ones. These people are a menace and must be fired at once. They create irrelevant work for everybody. Finally, there are the intelligent, lazy ones. They are suited for the highest office.¹

Helmut von Moltke's key staff, and most certainly his subordinate commanders, embodied these categorised characteristics. Relating these attributes to his work, Barry examines the key relationships that Moltke developed with his diverse, and oftentimes misguided, group of staff officers and commanders. Barry points out that, while the qualities and principal characteristics of leaders have been the subject of military thought for centuries, any accountable definition of "leadership" dates "only as far back as the nineteenth century," when Moltke played an integral part in Prussian victories against Denmark in 1864, in the Austro-Prussian conflict of 1866, and in the Franco-Prussian War from 1870 to 1871 (p. 268).

The arrangement of the book is unique but effective. The book is organised into chapters that focus on the senior commanders who were subordinate to Moltke. What is strikingly missing, however, is

¹ United States Naval Institute Proceedings, Professional Notes: January 1 to January 31, Section: Germany: Selecting Officers, March 1933 (Annapolis, Maryland: The Institute), 448.

any definitive focus on members of the staff who were supposedly the benefactors of Moltke's contributions to military staff organisation. The chapters in *Moltke and His Generals* emulate Moltke's personal leadership attributes as represented by the descriptions of the general's most prominent military leaders. For instance, Barry makes relevant comparisons and analyses of senior staff officers to include the most important senior officers, such as Moltke's strategic and doctrinal peer Albrecht Karl Leonhard von Blumenthal, and then focuses on these men, using personalities to build his argument about Moltke's leadership prowess (p. 73). As a wartime operational leader, Moltke is best known as the epitome of boldness, perseverance, flexibility and decisiveness.² Barry reviews these attributes and captures them in each chapter by describing each subordinate leader's personal and professional relationships with the Prussian Chief of Staff. Using these relationships as leadership examples, Barry surmises that "there existed a vital rapport" between Moltke and his subordinate general officers which helped Moltke become an effective leader (p. i).

While the structure of the book makes for an interesting and intriguing read, the author may have been better off identifying the leadership style as the topics for each section, providing examples for each type of style, rather than by campaign and personality. This would have better highlighted the leadership focus of the book. What is even more interesting is that Moltke's leadership experience outside the most senior levels of command is left in question with this work. While this book is a study about leadership, the eventual Chief of the Prussian Staff never commanded a unit larger than a company.³ This gap leaves the reader wondering how Moltke developed into the vaunted leader he became. Barry addresses this by describing Moltke's chronological career as a soldier to show the reader how his leadership skills evolved. What would improve this work's description of Moltke's leadership prowess would be to match Barry's explanations of Moltke's leadership examples in each chapter to Moltke's self-ascribed leadership categories.

Barry does an excellent job in the culminating section at the end of the book, which describes the history of leadership and its

² Barbara P. Morgan, "Operational Leadership: A Case of General Helmuth von Moltke" (Newport, Rhode Island: US Naval War College Manuscript, 2001), 4.

³ Byron Farwell, *The Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Land Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 569.

merits as the most dynamic element of combat power. While the information he presents in the conclusion gives credibility to the study, his conclusions could have found their way to the leading edge of the work as a prelude of what was to follow. One of the obvious conclusions made by Barry is to establish that Moltke “stands out from his predecessors and his contemporaries” in his ability to create an organisational framework that became the “blueprint for the conduct and management of war” in the form of a Great General Staff which was emulated by the world’s greatest militaries in the years to come (p. 271). What Barry does so soundly in this work is show how Moltke developed a conceptual set of attributes and structure for the General Staff as well as provides credibility that Moltke knew what characteristics were required to “match, in most instances, competent and authoritative chiefs of staff to the most refractory army commanders” (p. 269).

Most art of war enthusiasts and combat professionals credit Moltke with the creation of the General Staff. It is commonly known and accepted without question that Moltke orchestrated the birth of the staffs that found their way after centuries of testing onto the fields of fray in modern-day warfare. Author and member of the editorial board for *Central European History*, Allan Mitchell, wrote in *The Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry* that “[h]istorians generally love a winner, and it is admittedly difficult not to award the first prize to Moltke” when referring to the most prominent leaders of the nineteenth century.⁴ Barry supports Moltke’s military notoriety, writing that “the popular image of Moltke almost reaches hagiography” (p. 46).

Historically, Moltke is cited as being the first military leader to recognise that one commanding officer from a central position on the battlefield could no longer direct military formations. Thus, he imposed a different command philosophy on the strategic, operational and tactical levels, based on a clear mission statement and intent.⁵ Barry’s *Moltke and His Generals* stays in step with the clear majority of historians who are advocates of Moltke’s leadership by

⁴ Allan Mitchell, *The Great Train Race: Railways and the Franco-German Rivalry, 1815-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2000), 82.

⁵ Gunter Rosseels, “Moltke’s Mission Command Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century: Fallacy or Verity” (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US General Staff College, 2012), iv.

providing rationale and a basis for this well-known supposition. A consummate delegator, Moltke displayed the trust and confidence in his subordinate commanders that provided them the flexibility to operate within the spirit of his intent.

While the Prussian general, who was a student of Clausewitz, never described in writing his leadership philosophy, over the course of his career he produced a massive amount of military writings that, taken together, convey his approach to leadership and Barry makes effective use of these sources (p. 34). In the end, Barry's work on a study in leadership viewed through the lens of Helmut von Moltke, one of the most influential military leaders of the nineteenth century, would be of interest to both military professionals and warfare history enthusiasts.

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