

Prussia's Blood and Iron

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Modern World History-B Period

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Otto von Bismarck once famously declared, “[t]he great questions of the day are not decided by speeches and majority votes, but by blood and iron.”¹ Bismarck’s 1862 pronouncement to the Prussian House of Representatives attests to the truth because Prussia flourished and fell by the sword.² It rose from a disgraced country conquered by Napoleon in six weeks to the military juggernaut that unified Germany through three crucial conflicts against the mightiest European empires.³ The fire that forged the modern Prussian army ignited in 1806 when Prussia joined the Fourth Coalition to stop Napoleon.⁴ Unfortunately, the prestigious Prussian Royal Army, initially constructed by “the Great Elector” William, withered away due to social climbers who sought military service for career advancement, creating a corps of incompetent officers that lazily implemented predictable strategies.⁵ During the 1806 Napoleonic Battle of Auerstädt, the French outsmarted a 63,000-strong Prussian army twice their size.⁶ Duke Charles William Ferdinand failed to coordinate or press the numerical advantage of the Prussians, leading to a rout where the French chased them to Berlin.⁷ Prussia paid dearly in the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit, losing half its population, all possessions west of the Elbe, and all territory gained in the Three Partitions of Poland and occupied until it recompensed with heavy indemnity.⁸ Humiliated by Prussia’s embarrassing failure, Fredrick Wilhelm III assembled the Military Reform Commission to prevent a similar outcome.⁹ In response to Napoleonic-era doctrine and technological limitations, the commission’s officers and their successors generated

¹ Sebastian Haffner, *The Rise and Fall of Prussia* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson Limited, 1980), 84.

² Haffner, 143.

³ “Battle of Jena,” *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Battle-of-Jena/43516>.

⁴ “Napoleonic Wars,” *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Napoleonic-Wars/628625>.

⁵ Haffner, 67 and 71.

⁶ “Battle of Jena,” *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Battle-of-Jena/43516>.

⁷ “Battle of Jena.”

⁸ “Napoleonic Wars.”

⁹ Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 34.

clever ideas that reshaped Prussia's flagging military into Europe's most potent fighting force. The Napoleonic Wars compelled Prussia to innovate its military, permitting its triumphs in the 19th century against the French, Austrian, and Danish Empires and enabling the unification of Germany. The formation of a Germanic empire set the cautiously developing network of alliances known as the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance on an inevitable collision course that ultimately plunged the world into two conflicts of titanic proportions.¹⁰

The limitations of Napoleonic command structures galvanized the implementation of ingenious philosophical reforms that gave Prussian officers the ability to adapt and dominate their linear-thinking European counterparts. Helmuth von Moltke, the Chief of Staff for the Prussian army, understood the significance of intelligent troops and thus made educational rigor a priority.¹¹ Gerhard von Scharnhorst, a renowned Prussian general, similarly advocated for a military education of "[i]n peace, knowledge, and education. In times of war, courage, and conduct."¹² Therefore, examinations for promotions and entrance into the officer corps required demonstrating a keen military and general knowledge.¹³ Exam utilization introduced a meritocracy that rewarded the army's brightest minds.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the French military, which used a classic, nepotistic, nobility-only system, suffered from favoritism, rivalries, and self-aggrandizing generals.¹⁵ The emphasis on education extended to all levels of the Prussian military, including rank-and-file soldiers. Unlike its European counterparts, every man in the Prussian army could read and write.¹⁶ The literacy of the army drastically enhanced its

¹⁰ Katja Hoyer, *Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire* (Pegasus Books, 2021), 251.

¹¹ "Helmuth von Moltke," *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Helmuth-von-Moltke/53280>.

¹² "Gerhard Johann David von Scharnhorst," *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Gerhard-Johann-David-von-Scharnhorst/66086/>.

¹³ Hoyer, 152.

¹⁴ Hoyer, 152-153.

¹⁵ Wawro, 75.

¹⁶ Hoyer, 154.

capabilities by enabling the teaching of advanced concepts to ordinary troops through training manuals.¹⁷ Another ramification of Prussian proficiency was a radical improvement in battlefield cohesion. No longer could a fortuitous shot paralyze a platoon by killing the only literate officer who could read orders to his men.¹⁸ Moltke also introduced the concept of bestowing upon subordinate commanders the initiative to react to changes on the battlefield while still serving the intent of their orders.¹⁹ He knew commanders were inefficient when they hewed strictly to their orders due to the inherent unpredictability of war that caused “no plan [to] survive first contact with the enemy.”²⁰ His ideas were ridiculed in their time. In particular, military minds viewed the empowering of junior officers, dubbed “*Auftragstaktik*” or “Mission-type Tactics,” as reckless should the commanders falter.²¹ Von Moltke’s theories were an anathema to the prevailing Napoleonic-era mindset, which treated war like a chessboard with a centralized command staff manipulating the movements of each army down to the finest detail.²² It made sense in the past since troops lived or died based on their ability to follow prearranged plans.²³ However, this approach became hopelessly obsolete as massed formations became liabilities due to the lethal nature of modern firearms.²⁴ If a Prussian commander saw a lapse in his enemy’s judgment, he could pursue it with vigor.²⁵ On the other hand, a Napoleonic commander could only watch such opportunities slip through his fingers with the threat of immediate court martial if he dared defy orders.²⁶ During the 1870 Franco-Prussian War, in the Battle of Mars-la-Tour, the French retreated slower than the Prussians calculated, causing the 30,000 men from the Second Army

¹⁷ Hoyer, 154.

¹⁸ Hoyer, 159.

¹⁹ “Helmuth von Moltke”

²⁰ Wawro, 118.

²¹ Wawro, 77.

²² “Helmuth von Moltke”

²³ “Helmuth von Moltke”

²⁴ “Helmuth von Moltke”

²⁵ Haffner, 63.

²⁶ Haffner, 65.

sent to harass the French rear guard to encounter the entire 120,000-strong French Third Army.²⁷ Instead of retreating and waiting for orders like Napoleonic commanders, the Prussians, sensing chaos among the French, took to the offensive, culminating in an audacious charge by two cavalry regiments against the French artillery positions.²⁸ This act of suicidal bravery, later named “The Death Ride,” cost half of the 800 horsemen their lives but successfully silenced the guns.²⁹ Without support, the French infantry failed to break the German line, leading to the encirclement of the French Third Army at Metz and the capture of 100,000 men.³⁰ The philosophical reforms of the Prussians produced in reaction to the constraints of rigid, Napoleonic-era hierarchies gave Prussian officers the versatility required to combat the fog of war and outthink their adversaries.

The inefficiencies of Napoleonic-era static formations influenced the development of the Prussian army’s rapid encirclement tactics purpose-built for outflanking formations. In his 1869 “*Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*,” Helmuth von Moltke posited the idea of “March Divided, Fight United.”³¹ This stratagem saw the Prussian army divide its troops for deployment only to reorganize them into a massive army to fight a decisive battle, distinctly unlike the Napoleonic armies that marched in long columns and fought in broad lines.³² Smaller forces proved less stressful on supply lines and less vulnerable to modern firepower; furthermore, the army could coalesce to strike immediately.³³ In his famous work “*Vom Kriege*,” *On War*, Carl Von Clausewitz highlighted the practicality of speed, the concentration of force, and total war.³⁴

²⁷ Wawro, 204.

²⁸ Wawro, 204-213.

²⁹ Wawro, 213.

³⁰ Wawro, 243.

³¹ Helmuth von Moltke, “Instructions for Large Unit Commanders,” *Helmuth von Moltke on the Art of War* (Presidio Press, 1995).

³² Moltke, “Instructions for Large Unit Commanders.”

³³ Moltke, “Instructions for Large Unit Commanders.”

³⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, 1832.

Inspired by his predecessor, Von Moltke pioneered revolutionary, speed-based strategies that reshaped war indefinitely.³⁵ In a grim foreshadowing of *Blitzkrieg* less than a century later, he directed the Prussian army to overwhelm its enemies with lightning-fast deployment.³⁶ On a broader level, Moltke pressed for a goal of encirclement by mobilizing forces along an expansive front to envelop and crush foes as quickly as possible.³⁷ Such a profound shift in war technique confounded Prussia's enemies, who were used to straightforwardly confronting sizable forces.³⁸ Moltke's tactics demonstrated their worth in many battles, such as the battles of Dybbøl, Gitsdain, and Sedan in the 1864 German-Danish War, the 1866 Seven Weeks' War, and the Franco-Prussian War.³⁹ In numerous cases, the Prussians trapped and devastated their foes, vindicating Moltke's system in the eyes of skeptics.⁴⁰ Moltke's unique lightning warfare annihilated armies that used the uncomplicated, Napoleonic-era strategies by permitting Prussian troops to ravage and outflank their counterparts on the battlefield.

The Prussian army's shrewd integration of contemporary technologies designed to counter the impediments of Napoleonic-era armaments and transportation made it the most pernicious European military. In the 30 years since the Napoleonic Wars, vital technological developments transformed the face of war in Europe. Breech-loading rifles began replacing muskets, rifled cannons became accessible, and steam engines roared down railways like never before.⁴¹ As the world evolved at an unprecedented pace, so too did Prussia. The Prussian army was the first to adopt a breech-loading rifle in 1840 in the form of the revolutionary Dreyse

³⁵ "Carl von Clausewitz," *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Carl-von-Clausewitz/24254>.

³⁶ "Helmuth von Moltke"

³⁷ "Helmuth von Moltke"

³⁸ "Helmuth von Moltke"

³⁹ Hoyer, 241.

⁴⁰ "Helmuth von Moltke"

⁴¹ Hoyer, 203.

Needle Gun.⁴² The Dreyse, developed by the gunsmith Johann Nikolaus Dreyse, relied on a prepackaged paper cartridge rather than a separate shot and powder like former muzzleloaders.⁴³ The cartridge contained a bullet, powder, and percussion cap struck by a needle within the barrel to fire, hence the name “Needle Gun.”⁴⁴ It proved far easier to load thanks to its cartridge and breech system, allowing for a rate of fire of 12 shots per minute, far outclassing the trivial three shots per minute a musket produced.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Prussians adopted their first breech-loading artillery in 1856 in the form of the infamous Krupp guns manufactured by Alfred Krupp.⁴⁶ The conventional cannons were smoothbore and fired cannonballs prone to changing direction from winds, making them imprecise and ineffective at long ranges.⁴⁷ In contrast, the Krupp guns had rifled barrels, which spun their shells when fired, immensely augmenting accuracy.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Prussian projectiles were elongated, creating an aerodynamic shape suitable for providing tremendous accuracy at range.⁴⁹ An integrated breech also enormously shortened reload time.⁵⁰ A typical example was the C67 six-pound gun, capable of briskly and meticulously depositing shells onto targets up to five miles away, twice the effective range of cannons.⁵¹ Additionally, Krupp shells used the first contact detonators, removing the

⁴² Paul Scarlata, “The rifles of the Franco-Prussian War 1870-1871 part I--Germany and its allies: Front-line German small arms were actually somewhat inferior to the French, but the training and organization behind them would carry the day,” *Gale Power Search (Shotgun News, July 2010)*, https://go.gale.com/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=T003&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=SingleTab&hitCount=19&searchType=BasicSearchForm¤tPosition=10&docId=GALE%7CA233126263&docType=Article&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZGPP-MOD1&prodId=GPS&pageNum=1&contentSet=GALE%7CA233126263&searchId=R1&userGroupName=tel_s_tsla&inPS=true.

⁴³ “The rifles of the Franco-Prussian War 1870-1871 part I--Germany and its allies: Front-line German small arms were actually somewhat inferior to the French, but the training and organization behind them would carry the day.”

⁴⁴ Wawro, 60.

⁴⁵ “The rifles of the Franco-Prussian War 1870-1871 part I--Germany and its allies: Front-line German small arms were actually somewhat inferior to the French, but the training and organization behind them would carry the day.”

⁴⁶ “Artillery,” *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/artillery/110176>.

⁴⁷ Wawro, 66.

⁴⁸ “Artillery.”

⁴⁹ “Artillery.”

⁵⁰ “Artillery.”

⁵¹ Wawro, 77 and 79.

mobility-hindering necessity of keeping stockpiles of timed fuses on hand for different ranges.⁵² Satirically, the Prussians took Napoleon's adage of "God fights on the side of the best artillery" to heart against the French in the Franco-Prussian War.⁵³ During the Battle of Sedan, the Prussians, utilizing Moltke's tactics, cornered the Army of Châlons in Sedan and lined up over 400 artillery pieces on the heights overlooking the town.⁵⁴ Summing up the situation, a French subordinate famously remarked, "[w]e are in a chamber pot, about to be sh*t on."⁵⁵ Napoleon III, the French emperor, wandered aimlessly throughout his troops during the onslaught, despondently hoping a Prussian shell would end his misery.⁵⁶ He surrendered, along with 120,000 men, primarily due to the relentless siege conducted by the Prussian guns.⁵⁷ The Prussians not only made their army deadlier with modern firepower but also nimbler through railroads. Moltke oversaw an expansion of Prussia's railway network purpose-built for the swift deployment of troops.⁵⁸ He realized that "[e]ach and every addition to the communications, especially the railroads, must be considered a military advantage."⁵⁹ In those days, the primary mode of military transportation was horses which were limited by their low speed, range, and cargo capacity.⁶⁰ Moltke masterfully used the advent of railways for the rapid deployment and resupplying of troops across a broad front, perfectly countering the traditional mindset of war.⁶¹ In the opening stages of campaigns, the Prussians, using railroads, shuttled their men to the best positions.⁶² For instance, in Seven Weeks' War, the Prussians, employing five train lines, stormed

⁵² "Artillery."

⁵³ Haffner, 90.

⁵⁴ Wawro, 213.

⁵⁵ Wawro, 216-217.

⁵⁶ Wawro, 217.

⁵⁷ Wawro, 221

⁵⁸ "Helmuth von Moltke"

⁵⁹ Haffner, 42.

⁶⁰ Haffner, 42.

⁶¹ "Helmuth von Moltke"

⁶² "Helmuth von Moltke"

across the Austrian border and rapidly coalesced into three army groups that outflanked their stunned Austrian adversaries.⁶³ At the pivotal Battle of Königgrätz, the Dreyse also proved its mettle by inflicting 20,000 Austrian casualties at an extraordinarily abrupt pace.⁶⁴ With Austria's defeat, Prussia annexed the states of Schleswig, Holstein, Hanover, Hesse-Kassel, Nassau, and Frankfurt, completing the conquest of northern Germany.⁶⁵ Only the southern states had yet to be unified by 1867.⁶⁶ The superior logistics and firepower that the Prussians innovated in response to Napoleonic-era technical limitations enabled them to desolate the outdated armies of Europe.

One of Napoleon's most monumental yet unexpected legacies was the rise of the Germanic kingdom he effortlessly quashed in 1806.⁶⁷ The Napoleonic Wars obligated Prussia to adapt its military, granting it victory in the German Wars of Unification. Ironically, the French completed Germany's unification by forcing Hesse, Baden, Bavaria, and Wurtemberg to join the Prussians for mutual protection in Franco-Prussian War.⁶⁸ Victory fell upon the Prussians; thus, the Second Reich rose from the Second French Empire's ashes with Wilhelm I's coronation at the Palace of Versailles in 1871.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the brash descendants of the Kaiserreich unraveled the empire only in 47 years. Wilhelm II, the last German kaiser, represented the self-confident Germany that recognized no limits to German power.⁷⁰ The German Empire, propelled by pan-German nationalism, steamed straight towards conflict, bullying other nations through "*Machtspolitik*," "power politics," and embroiling itself in crises such as the 1905 First Moroccan Crisis and the 1911 Agadir Crisis.⁷¹ Bismarck, sensing the burgeoning boldness of

⁶³ "Helmuth von Moltke"

⁶⁴ Hoyer, 177.

⁶⁵ "German Empire," *Britannica School High*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/German-Empire/630990>.

⁶⁶ "German Empire."

⁶⁷ "Napoleonic Wars."

⁶⁸ "German Empire."

⁶⁹ "German Empire."

⁷⁰ Hoyer, 244.

⁷¹ "German Empire."

Germany's leaders, warned in the 1878 Congress of Berlin that "Europe today is a powder keg, and the leaders are like men smoking in an arsenal. A single spark will set off an explosion that will consume us all," and told King Wilhelm II in 1897 "[t]he crash will come twenty years after my departure if things go on like this."⁷² In 1918, 20 years after Bismarck's death, Wilhelm abdicated after losing his military backing in the disastrous Great War.⁷³ Prussia revolutionized war from thousands of men clashing on a field into a bloody, industrialized art spanning thousands of miles and millions of men by analyzing its defeat and establishing the principles of modern warfare to counter Napoleonic militaries. Every European nation scrambled to emulate Prussia's examples of intelligent troops, lightning warfare, and technological advantages, creating lethal armies capable of unleashing untold amounts of devastation.⁷⁴ It took millions of deaths, two world wars, and the threat of mutually assured destruction via nuclear warfare for nations to grasp the true brutality of total warfare and learn that no one wins in a war.

⁷² Haffner, 175 and 181.

⁷³ Haffner, 181.

⁷⁴ Wawro, 331.

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Outline:

Topic: The Prussian Military

Research Question: How did Prussia's military win wars against major European powers in the 1800s?

Title: Prussia's Blood and Iron

I. Introduction

- A. Hook: Otto von Bismarck once famously declared, “[t]he great questions of the day are not decided by speeches and majority votes, but by blood and iron.”
- B. Context: The fire that forged the modern Prussian army ignited in 1806 when Prussia joined the Fourth Coalition to stop Napoleon. Unfortunately, the prestigious Prussian Royal Army, initially constructed by “the Great Elector” William, withered away due to social climbers who sought military service for career advancement, creating a corps of incompetent officers that lazily implemented predictable strategies. During the 1806 Napoleonic Battle of Auerstädt, the French outsmarted a 63,000-strong Prussian army twice their size. Duke Charles William Ferdinand failed to coordinate or press the numerical advantage of the Prussians, leading to a rout where the French chased them to Berlin. Prussia paid dearly in the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit, losing half its population, all possessions west of the Elbe, and all territory gained in the Three Partitions of Poland and occupied until it recompensed with heavy indemnity. Humiliated by Prussia's embarrassing failure, Fredrick Wilhelm III assembled the Military Reform Commission to prevent a similar outcome.

- C. Thesis: The Napoleonic Wars compelled Prussia to innovate its military, permitting its triumphs in the 19th century against the French, Austrian, and Danish Empires and enabling the unification of Germany.
 - D. Ending Sentence: The formation of a Germanic empire set the cautiously developing network of alliances known as the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance on an inevitable collision course that ultimately plunged the world into two conflicts of titanic proportions.
- II. Body Paragraph 1: Military Philosophy
- A. Topic Sentence: The limitations of Napoleonic command structures galvanized the implementation of ingenious philosophical reforms that gave Prussian officers the ability to adapt and dominate their linear-thinking European counterparts.
 - B. Evidence: Helmuth von Moltke and Scharnhorst's education reforms
 - C. Comparison with the French army system
 - D. Evidence: Education reforms effects on troops
 - E. Evidence: Moltke's Auftragstaktik
 - F. Comparison to the previous command structure
 - G. Example: Battle of Mars-la-Tour
 - H. Ending Sentence: The philosophical reforms of the Prussians produced in reaction to the constraints of rigid, Napoleonic-era hierarchies gave Prussian officers the versatility required to combat the fog of war and outthink their adversaries.
- III. Body Paragraph 2: Military Tactics

- A. Topic Sentence: The inefficiencies of Napoleonic-era static formations influenced the development of the Prussian army's rapid encirclement tactics purpose-built for outflanking formations.
- B. Evidence: "March Divided, Fight United" Tactics
- C. Comparison to Napoleonic broad line tactics
- D. Evidence: Carl von Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*
- E. Evidence: Moltke's encirclement and lightning warfare
- F. Example: Battles from the German-Danish War, the Seven Weeks' War, and the Franco-Prussian War.
- G. Ending Sentence: Moltke's unique lightning warfare annihilated armies that used the uncomplicated, Napoleonic-era strategies by permitting Prussian troops to ravage and outflank their counterparts on the battlefield.

IV. Body Paragraph 3: Military Technology

- A. Topic Sentence: The Prussian army's shrewd integration of new technologies gave it a definite advantage over its European rivals.
- B. Evidence: Dreyse Needle Gun
- C. Comparison to breechloaders
- D. Evidence: Limitations of cannons
- E. Comparison to Krupp artillery and shells
- F. Evidence: Contact detonators
- G. Example: Battle of Sedan
- H. Integration of railroads for war

- I. Example: The Seven Weeks' War
 - J. Ending Sentence: The superior logistics and firepower that the Prussians innovated in response to Napoleonic-era technical limitations enabled them to desolate the outdated armies of Europe.
- V. Conclusion:
- A. Thesis Restatement: One of Napoleon's most monumental yet unexpected legacies was the rise of the Germanic kingdom he effortlessly quashed in 1806. The Napoleonic Wars obligated Prussia to adapt its military, granting it victory in the German Wars of Unification.
 - B. The creation of the German Empire: Ironically, the French completed Germany's unification by forcing Hesse, Baden, Bavaria, and Wurtemberg to join the Prussians for mutual protection in Franco-Prussian War. Victory fell upon the Prussians; thus, the Second Reich rose from the Second French Empire's ashes with Wilhelm I's coronation at the Palace of Versailles in 1871.
 - C. German Aggression-Agadir Crisis, Moroccan Crisis, King Wilhelm II: Wilhelm II, the last German kaiser, represented the self-confident Germany that recognized no limits to German power. The German Empire, propelled by pan-German nationalism, steamed straight towards conflict, bullying other nations through "*Machtpolitik*," "power politics," and embroiling itself in crises such as the 1905 First Moroccan Crisis and the 1911 Agadir Crisis.
 - D. Why it Matters-Triple Alliance, Triple Entente, WWI: Prussia revolutionized war from thousands of men clashing on a field into a bloody, industrialized art

spanning thousands of miles and millions of men by analyzing its defeat and establishing the principles of modern warfare to counter Napoleonic militaries.