Testing the Narrative of Prussian Decline: The Rhineland Campaign of 1793

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On 14 October 1806, the Prussian army, long considered Europe's best, collided with Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's *Grande Armée* at the twin battles of Jena and Auerstedt. In these engagements, Prussia suffered one of the worst military disasters in modern history. In a single day, the Prussian army effectively ceased to exist as a fighting force. In the following year, Napoleon forced Prussia to accept a peace that made it little more than a subordinate ally. However, over the next six years, a group of Prussian officers attempted to reform the Prussian army and state at almost every level in order to liberate Prussia from Napoleon's control. They increased the army's light infantry, adopted combined arms divisions as well as a new General Staff system, and endeavored to create a national army similar to the French model. While not all of their measures were successful, they produced a powerful modern army that played a leading role in driving Napoleon from Germany in 1813.

This story of Prussia's defeat and subsequent reform has dominated the historiography of Napoleonic Prussia. While Napoleon has received the vast majority of historical attention, those who have written on Prussia have focused on the Prussian reform movement or the Prussian army's campaigns against Napoleon. Historians such as Peter Paret, Gordon A. Craig, and T. C. W. Blanning all argue for the ineffectiveness of the Prussian army before the reform movement. These historians present the Prussian army before 1807 as an ossified relic, a hopelessly backward and rigid army commanded by a series of septuagenarians. The complete collapse of the Prussian army in 1806 has colored historians' understanding of it from the end of the Seven Years War to the Jena campaign. However, this interpretation is based mainly on the Prussian army's performance in the battles of Jena and Auerstedt.

However, apart from the 1806 campaign, these scholars scarcely address the field operations of the Prussian army during the French Wars. In 1994, the late Dennis Showalter challenged this interpretation in his essay, *Hubertusberg to Auerstädt: The Prussian Army in Decline?* Showalter asserts that the Prussian army served the strategic needs of Prussia very well

and was fairly successful in its operations until Jena. However, Showalter's work only briefly describes Prussian involvement in the War of the First Coalition and fails to supply enough detail to reach any firm conclusions. Showalter focuses mainly on the Prussian Kings theoretical conception of the Prussian army and their diplomatic strategy and barely mentions the field operations of the army.

The historical focus on Napoleon and his campaigns has greatly shaped historians' understanding of the French Wars and their meaning. In many ways, this is natural given the degree to which Napoleon dominated western military thought after 1815. Even the campaigns in which he did not participate are presented as the harbingers of Napoleon's "way of war." Military theorists such as Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert, are called prophets of Napoleon's way of war. Yet this centrality of Napoleon to the French Wars also distorts scholars' perception of them. For example, it is difficult to determine the degree to which French success, or Prussian failure, in 1806 was due to the deficiencies of the Prussian army or to the genius of Napoleon. Therefore, studying earlier campaigns in which Napoleon did not participate from the perspective of their participants, rather than their relation to Napoleon, is critical to comprehend the mindset of his enemies.

To understand the Prussian army that fought in 1806 and the subsequent army created by the Prussian reform movement, it is essential to examine Prussia's experience during the War of the First Coalition. To a considerable extent, this shaped the expectations of the Prussian officer corps before facing Napoleon. The combat the Prussians encountered in 1792-1795 differed drastically from Napoleon's way of war at the height of his career. Moreover, the Prussian army did not interpret its performance in the War of the First Coalition as a failure. While the Prussians fought no decisive pitched battles against the French, they believed, with some justification, that they out-fought the French in most engagements.

The French revolutionary armies introduced changes to warfare at every level of war. At the tactical level they adopted the assault column for a more aggressive infantry doctrine, and they employed far more light infantry than other armies. The French first utilized the idea of combined arms divisions and thus created the operational level of warfare.⁶ On the strategic level, they embraced a strategy of annihilation through decisive battles with their mass armies made possible by the total mobilization of the nation. Both contemporary and modern historians have interpreted these changes as a military revolution and view them as key to French success. Conversely, historians view the failure of other armies to adopt these changes as the reason for their defeat. However, the changes at the operational level took years to implement and were not fully present until 1795 and 1796 at the earliest. In the early years of the French Revolutionary Wars, the Prussian army proved itself able to defeat the French using eighteenth-century or "old regime" tactics. Such success explains the reluctance of many Prussian officers to reform the army before Jena as well as their confidence before the campaign.

Two engagements of the Rhenish campaign of 1793 serve as excellent examples of the Prussian experience during the War of the First Coalition. The first is the small Battle of Pirmasens on 14 September 1793. The second is the three-day Battle of Kaiserslautern fought from 28-30

November 1793. These two battles demonstrate the Prussian army's capabilities both in the more traditional positional warfare of the Frederician age and in field battles against the new French army. They provide a good basis to examine the Prussian army before the Jena disaster and assess its condition and performance against the new French tactics.

During the war's first major campaign, the Prussian army played a crucial role in the abortive invasion of France that ended at the 20 September Battle of Valmy. While the engagement is recognized as the first major battle of the war, it was inconclusive and unrevealing. While this battle saved the Revolution, it hardly represented a crushing loss for the Allies, nor did it lead to a string of French victories over Allied forces. The Prussians began the 1793 campaign by besieging the fortress city of Mainz on the Rhine. After the fall of Mainz on 22 July 1793, the Prussian army of 35,000 men remained mostly inactive for the next three weeks. The French retreated west from Mannheim toward France proper. However, for most of August, the Prussians remained inactive despite the capture of Mainz and the lack of a major French threat. Yet the French believed that Prussian inaction on the Rhine stemmed from Prussian weakness, and thus represented an opportunity. The properties of the properties of the prussian weakness and thus represented an opportunity.

On 9 August 1793, the Prussians resumed their offensive against the French army of the Moselle commanded by General Balthazar Alexis Henri Schauenburg, slowly advancing southwest and extending their left flank. On 17 August, Brunswick with roughly 8,000 men, advance southwest from his left flank and drove the French from Pirmasens and then repelled their attempts to retake the position on 20 August. Prussian possession of Pirmasens split the French defensive line between Lauterburg on the Rhine and Bobenthal; the main road through the hill country of this region to the Rhine passed through Pirmasens.¹¹

On the morning of 14 September, a French force that purportedly numbered some 15,000 men commanded by General Jean René Moreaux moved against the 9,000 Prussian soldiers at the Fehrbach outpost north of the city situated on the highway leading to Zweibrücken. ¹² For the first two hours of the battle, both sides simply exchanged artillery fire. Brunswick believed that the French advance might be a feint and that the true attack would be directed against Hohenlohe's force of three battalions to the north around Lauterecken on the Prussian right. Thus, he planned to probe the French at Fehrbach north of the Zweibrücken road to determine their actual strength and intentions. ¹³

Before Brunswick could proceed, the French cannonade ceased, and their infantry formed to attack the Prussians on the high ground across the Zweibrücken road. ¹⁴ The French deployed into four columns, three of infantry and one of cavalry. The three infantry columns on the left advanced south along the road with the cavalry to their right. As the French infantry approached, Prussian artillery switched to canister and raked the French columns. After reaching the hill slopes, the extreme French left column attempted to move north around the Prussian right flank but, finding the slope too steep, was forced to continue straight south. However, the French cavalry managed to catch the Prussian cavalry still forming and drove them into Pirmasens before they could rally. This threatened to roll up the Prussian line and allow the French to break into Pirmasens itself. Brunswick responded by deploying one battalion on the Prussian left, thus

stabilizing his line. After repulsing the French cavalry, the Prussian lines poured fire into the exposed flanks of the French columns. ¹⁵ With their own flanks now secure, the Prussian infantry's superior fire quickly halted the French assault columns. In addition, the Prussian cavalry deployed and drove the French horse from the field. This combined with Prussian musket fire to shatter the French columns, which collapsed and retreated. ¹⁶

In the immediate tactical sense, the Prussian victory at Pirmasens was incredibly lopsided. French forces numbered 15,000 men including 1,200 cavalry and 33 guns. French losses amounted to 800 dead, 1,200 wounded, 2,000 captured, and 18 guns; in total, the French suffered 4,000 casualties. The Prussians deployed some 7,000 men and lost only 200 casualties. The Prussians inflicted 26% losses on the French while suffering only 2% of their own. In addition, the Prussians completely routed the French and drove them from the field in a panic.

However, in the larger sense, the Battle of Pirmasens had virtually no strategic impact on the war in general. Following the engagement, the Prussian army in the Rhineland remained inactive and Brunswick abandoned Pirmasens over concerns about his supply lines. ¹⁸ Shortly after the battle, Prussian King Frederick William II announced his return to Berlin and seemed more interested in the dismemberment of Poland than the unprofitable war with France in the west. ¹⁹ Brunswick's failure to exploit the victory allowed the French to regroup and reinforce the Army of the Moselle so that it soon achieved numerical superiority in the theater. For the French, the defeat at Pirmasens hardly affected their war effort or changed their plans; on the strategic level the French defeat at Pirmasens proved negligible. ²⁰

Nevertheless, the Battle of Pirmasens demonstrates two realities of the Prussian army of the Revolutionary period. First, in 1793, the Prussian army was still highly effective, at least on the tactical level. At Pirmasens, the French outnumbered the Prussians by approximately two to one and still collapsed under Prussian fire. The French attempted to employ their new tactics of fast-moving assault columns and shock power to break the linear formations of Frederician warfare. By contrast, the Prussians fought in their thin linear formations that relied on firepower. In this case, the Prussian lines proved themselves perfectly capable of withstanding assault columns. Superior Prussian firepower did not just repel the French attack, but it easily drove them from the field. This engagement illustrated that on the tactical level, the Prussian army was still highly capable and more than a match for any of its enemies.

The second lesson of the Battle of Pirmasens is that the Prussian command lacked commitment to the war with France and displayed problems within its high command. The Prussian failure to exploit such a crushing tactical victory is difficult to explain and highlights the ambiguous nature of Prussia's war aims. While all the reasons Brunswick provided for not attacking the French at Zweibrücken can be substantiated, the Prussians had just proven themselves capable of defeating the French while at a great numerical disadvantage. These issues were further exasperated by the king's refusal to provide a clear and unified strategy for the Prussian army. The lack of a strong, unified command proved to be the greatest weakness of the Prussian army until the reform movement.

Following the Battle of Pirmasens, the Prussians again remained immobile and declined to press the French any further. The king's attention seemed far more focused on events in Poland and the possibility of a third partition of that unfortunate state.²¹ On 31 October 1793, the Committee of Public Safety officially appointed a new commander for the Army of the Moselle, twenty-five-year-old General Louis Lazare Hoche.²² Belonging to a new generation of revolutionary officers committed to aggressive action, Hoche was determined to drive Brunswick out of his positions and across the Rhine. Meanwhile, Brunswick decided to winter his army around Kaiserslautern and planned to withdraw from most of his forward positions.²³ Therefore, Brunswick retreated as Hoche launched his initial attack on 17 November. After offering some token resistance to delay Hoche, Brunswick united his forces at Kaiserslautern and prepared for battle.²⁴

On 27 November, a supremely confident Hoche sought to bring Brunswick to battle. Brunswick complied, deploying his army of roughly 26,000 men east of the Lauter River in a curve with his left flank on the city of Kaiserslautern in the south and with his right at Otterberg in the north. Hoche approached late on the day of 27 November, planning to strike the next day. He divided his army into three divisions that would attack Brunswick's forces separately. The left column, commanded by General Jean-Jacques Ambert, aimed to march around Brunswick's right and turn his flank near Otterberg. Meanwhile, Hoche in the center and Alexandre Camille Taponier on the right would cross the Lauter and fix Brunswick's forces in place. Despite its simplicity, this plan quickly disintegrated on 28 November. Concerned over Ambert's advance, Brunswick deployed his reserve to Otterbach. This move blocked Ambert and prevented him from attacking Brunswick's right. By stopping Ambert, the Prussians caused Hoche's plan to collapse into a series of uncoordinated frontal assaults. Although Hoche managed to cross the Lauter that day, his headlong attack against the Prussian center was easily repulsed. On the right, after Taponier enjoyed some initial success against Brunswick's left, the Prussians assumed a defensive position on the Hoheneck heights and defeated the French attack.

On the next day, 29 November, Hoche's forces again crossed the Lauter and positioned a large battery on their right. The French shelled the Prussian left for several hours and then launched an assault with a 10,000-man column led by Taponier.²⁹ However, just as on 28 November, this attack made little progress and the French fell back with significant losses. On the other side of the field, Ambert again attempted to turn Brunswick's right. This time he reached Otterberg and assembled a powerful battery in front of the town. Yet Brunswick had reinforced Kalkreuth's position at Otterberg. The ensuing artillery duel resulted in a stalemate after the French failed in their attempts to take the town by storm.³⁰ Hoche's own assault in the center likewise floundered, and the Prussians once again forced the French back.³¹

The battle continued on 30 November as Hoche made a final attempt to break the Prussian lines. On this day, the cannonade was fiercer than ever as Hoche committed more guns for his final assault. Brunswick responded by also deploying more artillery. Prussian artillery thoroughly shattered the ensuing French assault through the liberal application of grapeshot. On the Prussian right, Kalckreuth drove Ambert from Otterberg and across the Lauter as Prussian cavalry

threatened his flanks. ³² Meanwhile, on their left, the Prussian troops again thwarted the French attacks. ³³ With both of his flanks secure, Brunswick launched a counterattack against the exhausted and disordered enemy center at Poterberg. ³⁴ Faced with Prussian counterattacks against his front and with his left flank in danger, Hoche finally admitted defeat and withdrew his army from Kaiserslautern to the camp at Zweibrücken.

Although not as lopsided as Pirmasens, the Battle of Kaiserslautern was another Prussian victory. Commanding some 30,000 men, Hoche lost 3,000 men killed, wounded, and captured during the battle.³⁵ The Prussians suffered roughly 1,300 casualties from their initial force of 26,000 men.³⁶ In addition, the Prussians held their positions with relative ease throughout the battle. However, as at Pirmasens, Brunswick failed to exploit his victory, both from uncertainty over the French numbers and intention, and in compliance with the king's overall strategy for the war.³⁷

In many ways, the Battle of Kaiserslautern resembles Pirmasens but on a larger scale. In both engagements, the Prussians won a decisive tactical victory fighting on the defensive against poorly organized French attacks. While the French army did not break at Kaiserslautern the same way it did at Pirmasens, the outnumbered Prussians drove it from the field. Again, the Prussian army demonstrated the ability to repel the new style French assault columns by employing their traditional linear tactics. On the tactical level, the Prussian officers handled the engagement very well, thwarting the French attempts to turn their flank. However, on the strategic level, the Prussians again failed to gain any real advantage in either of these victories. After Kaiserslautern, Hoche simply turned south and left the Prussians to their own devices, trusting that they would do nothing.³⁸ After the battle, Brunswick took his army into winter quarters. In this sense, the Battle of Kaiserslautern had a negligible impact on the larger war.

Overall, the Prussian campaign in the Rhineland in 1793 presents a blurry image of the Prussian army. First and foremost, the Prussian army failed to make a significant strategic impact on the war. While it suffered no defeats and fought well against the French, the inaction of the Prussian army on the strategic level failed to seriously threaten the French after 1792. Some of this inertia was due to supply problems and failures to coordinate with their Austrian allies. ³⁹ Indeed, contemporary Prussian writers such as Christian Karl August Ludwig von Massenbach and J. A. R. von Grawert placed much of the blame for missed opportunities on the hated Austrians. However, much of the Prussian lethargy seems to have stemmed from the king's lack of commitment to the war. ⁴⁰ Frederick William II never viewed the war with France as more than a quick and easy land grab, and a means to keep France weakened. He never believed that the war was vital to Prussian interests and quickly became distracted by opportunity in Poland. His lack of commitment greatly limited his army's impact on the war. ⁴¹

However, in the engagements that the Prussians fought against the French, the army proved to be an effective fighting force. In 1793, the Duke of Brunswick's army outfought the French in every battle and demonstrated that the French still lagged behind the Prussian way of war. During the engagements at Pirmasens and Kaiserslautern, the Prussian army defeated larger French forces in open battle. The Prussian infantry exhibited the ability to repel French attack columns and

launch effective attacks of their own. Their artillery played key roles in breaking the French attacks in both battles, and their cavalry out-performed the French throughout the campaign. In these earlier battles of 1793, the Prussian army clearly and simply outfought the French.

The performance of the Prussian army during the campaign of 1793 certainly undermines many historians' assumptions of a decline. In 1793, the Prussian army appeared to be just as effective as it had been under Frederick II. In addition, its performance questions the relative importance historians have attached to the military reforms of the French Revolution. While the evidence from these two battles is hardly adequate to be conclusive, it certainly suggests that historians may have overstated the importance of French tactical innovations, in particular the assault column. While the Prussian army of the War of the First Coalition may not have delivered victories to equal the spectacular battles of Frederick the Great, it proved itself to be a highly effective weapon of war. Furthermore, while its commanders might have lacked the will to employ the army to its fullest potential, the Prussian army was far from an ossified relic.

However, Napoleon a led different army to Jena than any French force that the Prussians faced in 1793. By 1806, the French under Napoleon had mastered the use of combined arms divisions and organized them into corps. French corps led by experienced commanders granted the French army greater operational flexibility and resiliency and permitted the French to march and fight in a way that previous armies could not. These formations marching independently and living off the land, allowed the French Emperor to move his army at a speed none of his opponents could match. Napoleon ruthlessly exploited this advantage to outmaneuver the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians from 1805 to 1807. These innovations were the truly revolutionary changes of the Napoleonic era and helped to create the modern approach to war. The effects of this revolution first became apparent in the Wars of the Third and Fourth Coalition. Until they reorganized their armies along the French model, none of the continental powers could hope to defeat such an army under the command of Napoleon.

Endnotes

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² Blanning, 12; William W. Hagen, *Ordinary Prussians Brandenburg Junkers and Villagers, 1500-1840*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 472-473.

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⁶ Charles Edward White, *The Enlightened Soldier: Scharnhorst and the Militärische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801-1805* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 182.

⁷ Showalter "The Prussian Army," 63.

⁸ Ramsay Weston Phipps, *The Armies of The Frist French Repuslbic and the Rise of the Marshalls of Napoleon I* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), 1:85; Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars*, 73.

⁹ J. A. R. von Grawert, Ausführliche Beschreibung der Schlacht bei Pirmasenz, Den 14. September 1793 in Drei Abschnitten: nebst einem Bataillen-Plan und dazu Gehöriger General-Charte (Horvath, 1796), 56.

¹⁰ Blanning, 111; Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, trans. John Hall Stewart and James Friguglietti (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 2:5; Phipps *The Armies of the First French Republic*, 2:76.

¹¹ Grawert, 63; Arthur Chuquet, Les guerres de la révolution: Wissembourg (1793) (Plon, 1893), 100.

¹² J. L. A. Colin, *Campagne de 1793 en Alsace et dans le Palatinat* (Paris: Chapelot, 1902), 399; Chuquet, *Les guerres de la révolution: Wissembourg*, 162, 397.

¹³ Christian Karl August Ludwig Massenbach, *Memoiren zur Geschichte des Preussischen Staats unter den regierungen Friedrich Wilhelm II. und Friedrich Wilhelm III* (Amsterdam: Kunst- und Industrie-comptoir, 1809), 193; Grawert, 86, 97.

¹⁴ Grawert, 86, 97.

¹⁵ August Wagner, Der Feldzug der königlichen Preussischen Armee am Rhein 1793: aus den hinterlassenen Papieren des Herzogs von Braunschweig zusammengestell (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1831) 107-109.

¹⁶ Lazare Carnot, *Correspondance générale: août-octobre 1793* (Paris: Impr. Nationale, 1897), 60; Chuquet, *Les guerres de la révolution: Wissembourg*, 167; Colin, 407.

¹⁷Grawert, 87-99; Carnot, 154.

¹⁸ Massenbach, *Die Feldzüge Oesterreichs und Preussens*, 91.

¹⁹ Blanning, 111. Sybel, 3:34; Lefebvre, 2:15.

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²⁷ Beauvais, 119.: Massenbach, Memoiren zur Geschichte des Preussischen Staats, 394-398

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²⁹ Phipps, 2:89.

³⁰ Beauvais, 121.

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³⁷ Blanning, 110; Massenbach, *Memoiren zur Geschichte des Preussischen Staats*, 22; Wagner, 107-109.

³⁸ Blanning, 111.

³⁹ Massenbach, *Memoiren zur Geschichte des Preussischen Staats*, 22.

⁴⁰ Blanning, 135. Sybel, 3:34; Lefebvre, 2:15.
⁴¹ Showalter "The Prussian Army" 62.