



Volume 3. From Vormärz to Prussian Dominance, 1815-1866

Helmuth von Moltke: Memorandum on the Possible War between Prussia and Austria (1866)

In a memorandum from April of 1866 on the possible war between Prussia and Austria, Moltke describes the most efficient movement of troops to the front. As he explains, the efficient use of railways could allow Prussia to make up for its disadvantage with respect to troop numbers. The following passage emphasizes the need for increased railway transportation capacities and describes the effects of rapid mobilization – factors that indeed contributed to the Prussian victory that summer.

Memorandum, Berlin, April 2, 1866.

As a political question, the war against Austria, its probability or inevitability, lies outside the scope of my judgment. But from my standpoint I believe I must express the conviction that the success or failure of this war essentially depends on our reaching a decision about it sooner than the Austrians, and if possible, right now.

One advantage for us, which cannot be overstated, is that we can advance our army on five railroad lines and thereby have it essentially concentrated on the Saxon-Bohemian border within 25 days.

Austria has just one railway leading toward Bohemia, and allowing for the troops it already has in Bohemia and Galicia, and assuming further that its cavalry is already on the march, it requires 45 days to assemble 200,000 men.

If Bavaria joins Austria, then it is not so much its army as the use of its Regensburg-Pilsen-Prague railway line that will be disadvantageous for us, since this shortens the above-mentioned Austrian concentration by about 15 days.

If the mobilization of the Prussian army is ordered right now, then Bavaria – so ill-prepared for war in terms of arms, mobilization, and the concentration of its approximately 40,000 men near Bamberg – will in all probability not be ready when the first battle between Austria and Prussia has been fought. Deploying the Bavarian armed forces can hardly serve the purpose of laying siege to Coblenz, or Cologne, or even Erfurt, or of seizing Prussian territory, but more probably of waiting for a successful outcome and then showing up as an armed power on the side of the victor.

For us it all depends on defeating this one enemy Austria, [and] to this end we have to muster all [our] forces, and if anybody should ask for my opinion, we have to enlist not only the VIIth, but also the VIIIth Army Corps.

Putting ourselves, as is then necessary, in possession of Mainz, we [will] then have in this place, in Coblenz, Cologne, and Erfurt, the kinds of bases essentially maintained by militia, so that even the most improbable invasion of the Rhine Province or Thuringia by the south Germans cannot be of any consequence as soon as we are finished with Austria. Moreover, the VIIth and VIIIth Army Corps would be a more imminent threat to Munich if they were to penetrate through to Prague than if they were to be concentrated around Mainz.

If, with respect to Bavaria's military situation, the minimum that needs to be attained is not conceding the use of the Regensburg railway for Austrian transports (which would really be a hostile measure against us), then we will still have the decisive advantage of the initiative in the event of an immediate mobilization of the army.

If Austria wants an alliance with Saxony, then it cannot avoid contributing to the country's defense; otherwise, Dresden's cabinet would have to seek a separate peace at the last moment. We shall reach Dresden with the IVth, VIIth, VIIIth, and Guards Corps on the 31st day with over 100,000 men.

If everything that is now available in Bohemia goes to support Saxony, then we would only encounter 74,000 men. For with only one railway line, it would not be possible, at the designated time, to assemble more than 100,000 men from the Austrian crown lands, from Hungary and Galicia, and these would necessarily have to fight against our Ist, IInd, IIrd, Vth, and VIth Corps, which have over 150,000 men.

We would therefore have the prospect, in Bohemia as in Saxony, of striking the first blows from a position of significant superiority.

If, by contrast, the use of the Bavarian railroad line is granted to the Austrians, then [the following numbers] can be available on the designated 31st day.

from Hungary and Austria	164,000
[+] from Galicia	18,000
[=]	182,000 men
[+] as reinforcements	50,000 men
[+] and including Saxons	24,000 men
[=] putting the entire army at	256,000 men
[−] and then after deducting the garrison forces, at about	16,000 men
[=] so that the number previously estimated as maximum	240,000 men

Whether financial considerations, domestic complications, and the political situation will even allow Austria such a development of forces is a question that has to remain undecided here. Military calculation can only reckon with given magnitudes, with the normal figures of the war budget, and the efficiency of transportation. But the result depends not only on the size of the bodies of troops, but also on the time within which these can be used to advantage by both sides, and it is in this very respect, as just shown, that Bavaria's attitude comes into consideration quite fundamentally, [and] not so much owing to the armaments of the southern Germans.

[. . .]

Source: Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltkes militärische Werke [Moltke's Military Writings]*, ed. Großer Generalstabe [ed. the General Staff]. Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1896-1912, vol. 1, pp. 74-76.

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