German History in Documents and Images

Volume 2. From Absolutism to Napoleon, 1648-1815
Frederick II ("the Great") of Prussia, "General Principles of War," 134-Page Manuscript in French (1748), issued as Confidential Instructions to his Generals in 1753 (1748/1753)

Here, Frederick pithily expresses his pride in the largely home-grown Prussian soldiery and their noble-born officers. He also demonstrates his concern for the troops' provisioning, his preference for fast-paced and aggressive battlefield tactics over defensive maneuvers, and his wariness of Brandenburg-Prussia's neighbors, especially Austria and Saxony.

Frederick the Great's "General Principles of War" (1748)

The wars that I have waged have afforded me the opportunity to reflect deeply on the principles of the great art that has raised or destroyed so many a kingdom. Roman discipline persists with us alone. Let us also follow the example of the Romans in making war the object of our study and peace our constant practice.

I have therefore deemed it useful to pass my reflections on to you; after me, you have the greatest share of command and a mere indication of my thoughts must suffice; finally, you must act in accordance with my principles in my absence.

In this work, I have combined my own reflections with those I found in the writings of the greatest generals and turned them into a synthesis, which I have applied to the training of our troops.

I write only for my officers. I speak only of what is applicable to the Prussian service, and I have no enemies in mind other than our neighbors – for those two words have unfortunately become interchangeable. I hope that my generals will be more persuaded by reading this work than by anything I could tell them orally, and [I hope they] will recognize that the discipline of our army is the foundation for the glory and preservation of the state. If they look at these observations from this perspective, they will be more zealous than ever before in maintaining order among the troops in full strength, so that it cannot be said that we let the instruments of our fame grow blunt in our hands. It is nice to have won fame. But far be it from us to fall asleep in blameworthy safety. Rather, we must prepare well in advance the instruments that time and circumstances will give us the opportunity to use.

In all the reflections that follow I presuppose that my rules for the army are the catechism, as it were, of my officers, and I will treat in this work only that which concerns the general and is greatest and most difficult about the art of war.

Chapter 1
Advantages and shortcomings of Prussian troops

Our troops demand unceasing diligence from their leader. With a constant preservation of discipline, they must be maintained with the utmost care and nourished better than perhaps all other troops in Europe.

Half of our regiments consist of native sons, half of mercenaries. The latter, whom no bond ties to the state, seek to run away at every opportunity. That is why it is very important to prevent desertion. A few of our generals believe that one man is only one man, and that the loss of a single person has no influence on the whole. That may be true of other armies, but not of the Prussian one. If an inept fellow deserts and is replaced by another fool, it matters naught. But if the troops lose a soldier who has been drilled for two years to acquire the necessary physical skills, and if he is replaced poorly or not at all, this can have dire consequences over the long run. After all, we have seen how entire regiments were brought to ruin by the negligence of officers in small matters. I myself have seen some that were quite remarkably shrunken through desertion. Such losses weaken the army; for the number always adds up to a lot. Thus, if you do not keep a handle on it, you will lose your best forces and will not be able to replace them. Although there are plenty of people in my state, I ask you whether many have the stature of our soldiers. And even if they do, are they already trained?

It is therefore a crucial obligation of every general who commands an army or a single corps to prevent desertion. This is done by:

1. not camping too close to large forests if the conditions of war do not compel one to;

2. frequently visiting the soldiers in their tents;

3. having patrols of Hussars circle the camp;

4. placing *Jäger* into the fields at night and doubling the cavalry posts in the evening, so that their chain is all the more dense;

5. not allowing people to disperse, but ordering the officers to lead them in formation to fetch straw and water;

6. by severely punishing marauding, the source of the greatest excesses;

7. on marching day, not withdrawing the guards from the villages until the army is under arms;

8. marching at night only for compelling reasons;

9. strictly prohibiting people from leaving the ranks on marching days;

10. having Hussar patrols ride alongside the infantry when it is marching through a forest;

11. on marches through defiles, placing officers at the entry points and end points, and having them immediately put the troops into formation again;

12. if retreating movements are necessary, carefully concealing this from the troops and inventing a pretext that soldiers like to hear;

13. always making sure that the troops want for nothing, be it meat, bread, straw, brandy, and so on;

14. investigating the causes if desertion takes root in a regiment or a company, and determining whether a soldier is regularly receiving his pay and all the allowances to which he is entitled, or whether the captain is guilty of embezzlement.

The maintenance of discipline requires no less discipline. Some may say: the higher ups will see to that! But that is not enough. In an army, everything must be pursued to perfection, and one must recognize that everything that happens is the work of a single person. The greater part of an army consists of negligent people. If the general is not constantly on their backs, the entire artful and perfect machine will fall into disorder very quickly, and he will possess a well-disciplined army only in thought. One must therefore become accustomed to working unceasingly. Whoever does that will learn by experience that this is necessary, and that abuses need to be remedied every day. They escape the attention only of those who do not make the effort to look out for them.

This constant, laborious work may seem harsh, but a general who does it will see himself richly rewarded for it. What successes he can achieve over the enemy with such mobile, brave, well-disciplined troops! A general who would be considered audacious in other nations, with us does only what accords with the rules. He can venture and undertake everything that humans are capable of achieving.

The things that can be embarked upon with such well-disciplined troops! Order has become the habit of the entire army. Punctuality has come so far among officers and the troops that everyone is ready half an hour before the appointed time. From the officer down to the last common soldier, no one talks, but all act, and the command of the general is promptly followed. Thus, if he only knows how to command properly, he can be assured that his commands will be followed. Our troops are so agile and flexible that they can draw up in battle formation in no time.

Given the speed of their movements, they can almost never be attacked by the enemy. Do you want to engage in a firefight: what troops fire as rapidly as the Prussian ones? The enemies say one is standing before the maw of hell if one faces our infantry. Is it necessary to attack with the bayonet: which infantry advances on the enemy better than they, with a firmer step and without wavering? Where does one find more poise in the greatest dangers? Do you have to swivel to attack the enemy's flank? Then it is accomplished within the blink of an eye and without the least effort.

In a country in which the military estate is the noblest one, where the flower of the nobility serves in the army, where all officers are people of standing, and where native sons, namely the sons of burghers and peasants, are soldiers, a feeling of honor must necessarily prevail among the troops. And it prevails to a high degree. I myself have seen that officers would rather be killed in action than yield. Neither officers nor soldiers will tolerate among themselves people who exhibit weaknesses that would not be cause for reprimand in other armies. I have seen badly wounded officers and soldiers who would not leave their posts or withdraw to get themselves bandaged up.

With such troops one could conquer the whole world, were the victories not as pernicious to them as to their enemies. For one can undertake everything with them, if one only has enough food. If you march, you can preempt the enemies through speed. If you attack a forest, you drive out the enemy. If you storm a mountain, you chase the defenders from the heights. If you fire, you inflict a bloodbath. If you have the cavalry attack, there is a massacre until the enemy is destroyed.

But since the excellence of the troops alone is not enough, and an inept general can destroy all these advantages, in what follows I shall speak of the qualities of a general and prescribe the rules, some of which I have learned at my own expense or which have been left to us by the great generals.

Chapter 2

Campaign plans

As soon as one intends to go to war, campaign plans are drawn up. Since the neighbors of a prince are usually his enemies, we shall regard the Russians, the Saxons, and especially the Austrians as such. Politics and the art of war must join hands in designing the campaign plans. One must know the strength of the ruler against whom one is waging war, his allies, and the land that will be the stage of your glory or your shame. As far as the number of troops is concerned, it must be enough for you if you can put 75,000 men against 100,000 in the field. As far as the allies of the enemy are concerned, one either spares the powers that he approaches for help, or one crushes them before they can unite their strengths with the others. The land into which you intend to carry the war must be known to you as precisely as a chessboard is to a chess player.

In general, all wars in which we move too far from our borders are useless. Have we not seen all wars waged by other nations in this way end unhappily! Charles XII's fame went down in the wasteland of Pultava. Emperor Charles VI was not able to hold his ground in Spain, nor were the French able to in Bohemia (1742). All campaign plans that are aimed at distant advances must therefore be dismissed as bad.

Different plans are devised for defense than for attack

A plan that centers exclusively on defense is useless. It forces you to occupy fortified camps; the enemy goes around you, and since you do not dare to fight, you withdraw. The enemy goes around you again, and when all is said and done it turns out that you have lost more territory by your withdrawal than through a lost battle. Also, your army shrinks more from desertion than it would from the bloodiest battle. The kind of exclusive defense I am talking about is of no use; for with it, everything can be lost and nothing gained. Thus, I prefer the boldness of a general who would rather hazard a battle at the right time; then he has everything to hope for, and even if things go wrong, he still has a means of defense.

An offensive campaign plan requires a precise study of the enemy's borders. After careful consideration of where to begin the attack, one determines accordingly the army's staging ground and, finally, procures the foodstuffs.

For the sake of greater clarity, I will illustrate my principles from examples and devise attack plans against Saxony, Bohemia, and Moravia.

[. . .]

Even if I disapprove of a campaign plan that is limited to pure defense, I am well aware that one cannot always wage an entirely offensive war. I merely demand that the general on defense does not have his hands bound through some kind of orders, but that defense is used instead as a ruse that stimulates the enemy's sense of self-regard and tempts him into mistakes from which a skillful general can draw his advantage.

On defense, the general's greatest art lies in starving out his enemy. This is one means by which he puts nothing at risk but can win everything. This requires that one eliminate the play of chance as much as possible through shrewdness and agility. Hunger defeats a man far more surely than the courage of the enemy. However, since the removal of the supply train or the loss of a depot does not immediately end the war, and since only battles lead to a decision, one must employ both means to achieve one's goal.

I content myself with devising two defensive plans according to my principles: one for Lower Silesia, the other for the Electoral March.

[. . .]

Far more difficult is the defense of the Electoral March, because it is an open land and because the forest bordering Saxony is equally unfavorable for camps and marching. However, I believe that one would have to act as follows.

Berlin, an open city, requires my greatest attention as the capital of the land. It lies only 12 miles from Wittenberg. I assume that the enemy's army will assemble there. If so, the enemy could carry out three plans. One would be to march along the Elbe; however, that would be difficult for him because of Magdeburg, for one cannot leave such a place to one's rear. Second, the enemy could come across the Oder and the new canal. In that case, however, he would leave his entire land open, and one could quickly throw him back to Saxony through a sally against Wittenberg. The third plan would be to march straight toward Berlin. The best defense would be to invade Saxony, as we did in the winter of 1745. Withdrawing behind the Spree or Havel would mean giving up the land. I would rather gather my army near Brandenburg, bring my foodstuffs to Brandenburg and Spandau, destroy all the bridges across the Havel except for those to Brandenburg and Spandau, and make a few fast marches to attack the Saxons in their own land, defeat them, and throw them on the defensive. Say what you will, but there is no other decision.

Most difficult are campaign plans by which one has to defend oneself against much stronger and mightier enemies. One must then seek one's refuge in politics and endeavor to divide one's enemies, or to split off one or the other through advantages bestowed upon him. In military terms one must then know how to lose at the right time (he who wants to defend everything defends nothing), one must sacrifice one province to the enemy, and in the meantime go after the others with all one's strength, force them to battle, and use every possible means to defeat them. Then one must send detachments against the others. Such wars wreck the armies through the exertions and marches one asks of them, and if they last long, they come to an unhappy end.

As it is, all campaign plans must take their cues from the temporal circumstances and the nature and number of the enemies one is dealing with. One should never scorn the enemy in the abstract; rather, one should put oneself in his place and ask what one would do in his stead. The more obstacles one foresees in one's plans, the fewer one will later find in their implementation. In brief, one must foresee everything, recognize all difficulties, and know how to eliminate them.

[. . .]

These are more or less the main points of large military operations. I have developed their principles in as detailed a manner as possible, and have endeavored above all to be clear and understandable. However, should you be in doubt about this or that point, I would be pleased if

you presented them to me, so that I may explain my reasons in greater detail, or, if I have said something wrong, come over to your opinion. Already my paltry experience of war has shown me that this art cannot be completely learned, and that serious study always leads to the discovery of something new. I believe that I will not have wasted my time if this work stimulates my officers to ponder a craft that opens up to them the glorious career of fame, wrests their names from the darkness of time, and secures them immortality in return for their efforts.
Dixi (I have spoken).

Source of original French text: *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*. Volume 28. Berlin: Imprimerie Royale (R. Decker), 1856, pp. 1-107.

Source of German translation from the French: *Die Werke Friedrichs des Großen* [*The Works of Frederick the Great*]. Volume 6, *Militärische Schriften* [*Military Writings*], edited by Gustav Berthold Volz. German by Friedrich v. Oppeln-Bronikowski. Berlin: Hobbing, 1913, pp. 3-86.

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