

# Chapter IV

## Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, Clausewitz

The Frederician system of warfare had collided with the new French system for the first time at Valmy, had then continued the struggle for two more years, 1793 and 1794, and in this time had still shown itself to be qualitatively superior. For political reasons, but militarily undefeated, Prussia withdrew from the war in the spring of 1795 as a result of the Treaty of Basel. When she again crossed swords with the French eleven years later, the French had in the meantime developed into the soldiers of Napoleon, and now Prussia collapsed at the first blow. We do not realize the full nature of this event if we say with Queen Louise that Prussia had gone to sleep on the laurels of Frederick the Great. As proud as they were of the inherited fame, criticism and reform movements were also quite active and the old and the new were already locked in combat before the crisis. Even before the French themselves were fully aware of their own creation in tactics, the then Hanoverian Major Scharnhorst entered in his diary on 10 July 1794: "The present French war will strongly shake up the accepted tactical system in a few points," and toward the end of the century (1797) he wrote several essays in which he elaborated on the sentence "It is an established fact that the French skirmishers have decided the greatest part of the affairs in this war," and he added his proposals for the development of the tactics that still prevailed in the German armies.<sup>1</sup> He wished to link the old and the new together organically. It seemed to him out of place to give up the linear formation or to loosen up all the infantry into marksmen, but he proposed that the third rank be used for the skirmishing battle.<sup>2</sup> In any case, the third rank had not been very useful for the salvo, and in the revolutionary war the transition had already been made to the formation in two ranks. Carried out as a general rule, however, that resulted in uncontrollably wide and dangerously thin lines. Now, by having a third of the infantry move out as skirmishers and taking for that purpose not the first rank, but the third, the old, well-ordered, and firmly cohesive front remained

and was able to profit from its advantages. But the marksmen, who moved forward around the flanks of the battalions, strengthened the fire power of the whole much more intensively than when they remained in the third rank of the linear front, where they, furthermore, still took their place again to reinforce the front in an emergency. The retention of the close-ordered front for salvo fire and finally for the attack seemed so important to Scharnhorst that he did not even want the men of the first two ranks to be taught to fight as marksmen.

Even when Scharnhorst was taken over into the Prussian service in 1801, his ideas were still in no way accepted. Of course, General Prince Hohenlohe did introduce, for the same Silesian regiments that he later commanded at Jena, skirmishing by the third rank (1803). But in the same year Field Marshal von Möllendorff issued an order in Berlin in which he directly forbade aiming while firing; the soldiers were supposed "to hold the rifle horizontally while keeping the head erect."<sup>3</sup>

It is clear then that the old and the new were already struggling with one another in Prussia before 1806, but in every important respect the old was unshaken, and the army, in its composition, was still completely of the old Frederician type. As such, however, it was not poorer, as might be expected, but better than in Frederick's time. Its discipline was unshaken, and the officer corps was brave, but the spirit had disappeared, the leadership was miserable, the enemy was a giant, and so the army necessarily had to go down to defeat. In other works I have expressed myself in detail concerning this period and these events, the catastrophe, the reconstruction, and the final victory of Prussia, and I do not intend to repeat those points here.<sup>4</sup> The result was that Prussia now accepted for itself the ideas of the French Revolution to which it had succumbed, was rejuvenated with the help of those ideas, extended itself again in the area of the military even more so than formerly, and worked out the ultimate possibilities both practically and theoretically.

It should be added here that Austria, too, after the defeat of 1805, revised the old tactics under the direction of Archduke Charles and blended the tactics of skirmishers and columns in a clever manner with the linear formation to the extent that this was possible with an army lacking a national basis.<sup>5</sup> I have already cited above (p. 403) the argumentation of General Mack as to why the tactics of skirmishers should be rejected. A critical witness as to how different the spirit of the old military pedagogy was and how difficult it necessarily was to effect the transition into the new spirit is a report of Lieutenant Field Marshal Bukassowicz to the Imperial War Council in 1803:

In the Turkish war a troop unit at Besania-Damm was ordered to lower its bayonets to half the height of a man, and since the men had not learned to do anything else, the unit remained as motionless

as a statue. The Turks took advantage of this and moved in under the muskets with bared knives and immediately cut off the feet of the soldiers, as a result of which the troops had to learn from experience that they were to jab with the bayonet at the command "Jab!"<sup>6</sup>

The Russians were still governed by Suvorov's words: "The bullet is a foolish woman, but the bayonet is a whole man." As late as 1813 only the light regiments used skirmisher tactics in the Russian army; the rest of the infantry was not at all familiar with combat by individuals.<sup>7</sup>

In Prussia, Scharnhorst, as minister of war, transformed the old mercenary army into a national people's army by eliminating foreign recruitment and establishing the universal military obligation, which the French had again dropped. This idea encountered so much opposition that it could not be put into effect during the preparatory period but only at the moment of the revolt (9 February 1813). And at first it was also announced only for the duration of the war, but in 1814 it was again put into effect and accepted definitively through the efforts of Boyen, the disciple and successor of Scharnhorst.<sup>8</sup>

Although combat as skirmishers had become of the greatest importance for the French, as we have seen, it remained an uncultivated plant. In Prussia, as already previously in Austria, these tactics were now systematically introduced by regulations based on the proposals that Scharnhorst had already made in writing in 1797. The three-ranked linear formation, with its salvo fire that swept everything away in front of it, remained the basic formation. But the third rank was supposed to move out as skirmishers for the battle of marksmen, and in case of necessity even the whole battalion might be spread out as skirmishers. (In this respect, Scharnhorst now moved out beyond his proposal of 1797.)<sup>9</sup>

The battalion deployed in line was not supposed simply to deliver salvo fire but was also supposed to be able to apply the striking force of its depth in the attack. In order to make this possible, Scharnhorst established, also in keeping with the French model, the "column toward the middle," two platoons wide and four platoons deep. The battalion was able to deploy into line from this column with the greatest imaginable speed or from the line to form the column, since the outer platoons from the right and the left simultaneously placed themselves behind those in the center.

The "column toward the middle" was twelve men deep, or when the marksmen were deployed, eight men deep (since the battalion numbered four companies or eight platoons). That was the normal depth of the Greek phalanx, and it was therefore, according to the older concepts, still a linear formation, but with respect to the formation in three ranks

that had been established in the eighteenth century, it was already a column.

Just as Scharnhorst carried over the French organizational ideas to Prussia and at the same time renewed them, so was Gneisenau, who had already supported Scharnhorst in the reform of the army, the one among Napoleon's opponents who had completely adopted the latter's strategy, so that he was able to strike the mighty one with his own sword. The great mission of the allies in the autumn campaign of 1813 was to unite their armies, which were in position in Brandenburg, Silesia, and Bohemia, forming a semicircle around Napoleon, on a single battlefield without giving the opponent the opportunity to strike them individually and defeat them from his central position. This task was accomplished when the Silesian army, as Napoleon intended to close with it after its crossing of the Elbe at Wartenburg on 3 October, did not withdraw across the Elbe but, sacrificing its communications, marched around Napoleon and joined the Schwarzenberg army on the Saale in Napoleon's rear. This maneuver cut Napoleon off from France and could have resulted in the encirclement and destruction of his entire army by the superior forces of the allies. Schwarzenberg's chief of staff, Radetzky, had also already drawn up a plan along these lines, that even up to our time has been misunderstood and distorted in the grossest manner, as if its purpose were not so much to destroy the French army as to force it by maneuver to withdraw without a battle in the sense of the old strategy. Radetzky's ingenious plan was broken up by the intervention of Czar Alexander at the behest of his military advisor, General von Toll. The allied armies separated once again and gave the French free passage on their withdrawal route toward the west.<sup>10</sup>

A move of similar type and boldness as the march from the Elbe to the Saale in 1813 was the march in 1815 from Ligny via Wavre to La Belle-Alliance.<sup>11</sup> Both maneuvers were all the more effective in that Napoleon had not reckoned with them and consequently made false moves himself in 1813 by attacking into thin air and in 1815 by failing to order Grouchy's corps to the battlefield at the right time. "These animals have learned something," he shouted.

To complete a great phenomenon in the real world, it must also have its theory. It is remarkable enough that even the theoretical thinker who was able to clarify Napoleon's strategic actions belonged to the Prussian army—Clausewitz, a disciple of Scharnhorst and a friend of Gneisenau. How these three men are to be interrelated is strongly expressed in the sentence that Gneisenau wrote to Clausewitz when Scharnhorst's remains were transferred to the Veterans' Cemetery in Berlin from Prague, where he had died: "You were his John, and I only his Peter, although I was never disloyal to him as the other Peter was to his master."

Before Clausewitz did so, the French Swiss Jomini had already un-

dertaken to analyze Napoleon's art of war. He was a talented, widely read, and very prolific author, and he also understood well and described as early as 1805 the decisive point in the Napoleonic strategy, his drive toward the decisive battle, but he still did not penetrate the real nature of Napoleonic action and his strategy in general. That would have required the special drive toward deep philosophic exploration that had filled life in Germany since Kant and Hegel and awakened in the Prussian officer the interpreter of the god of war whose acts had overturned the old world and had forced mankind to build a new one. Jomini sought the nature of strategy in the lines of operation and tested the advantages of the inner and outer lines of operation. Clausewitz recognized that bases and lines of operation and other aspects pertaining to them were, to be sure, very useful concepts to be understood and to clarify situations but that rules for plans and decisions could not be derived from them, because in war all the elements of action are uncertain and relative. Consequently, strategic action cannot be of a doctrinaire nature but must spring rather from the depth of character. War, however, is an action of politics, and strategy can therefore in no way be isolated but must always be considered only in its relationship to politics. Whoever complains that politics had interfered in the conduct of war is saying something that is logically nonsensical, and he really means that the political interference as such seems false to him. Correct politics can also direct strategy in only a correct way—that is, provided the statesman does not think incorrectly in military matters. In the most critical decisive moments, politics and strategy are not to be distinguished from one another, and the universal historical effect of the great strategist emanates from his personality as a whole. Frederick's moderate war plan at the outbreak of the Seven Years' War and the intensification of his plans in the following year were completely determined by political factors, consideration of the allies of the empress, and not because he believed he could surely defeat the Austrians with his oblique battle formation. Rather, because he had become imbued with the idea of honorable defeat, he risked the attack against superior forces at Leuthen.

The superiority that lifted General Bonaparte above all the other brave and brilliant soldiers of the revolutionary armies was rooted not only in his eminent military qualities but just as much in his sense of politics. For it was only his political superiority that allowed him to carry out his far-reaching strategic ideas, because he envisioned capping his military success politically before a reaction destroyed what had been won. The fact that Napoleon did not reckon with the reappearance of the Prussians on the day of La Belle-Alliance can logically be considered an error on his part that is hard to understand. But it is precisely here that his heroism lies. If he had expected the arrival of the Prussians, he would not at all have been able to accept battle against the oppressive superiority and

would have ended as did Bazaine in 1870, who from the start despaired of success and finally had to capitulate without having fought out a battle. Even Napoleon was in no way able to win the campaign against the overwhelming enemy numbers under two commanders like Wellington and Gneisenau. But the fact that he came very close to victory and finally went down to defeat not in shame but with fame created for him personally an unforgettable brilliance and for his people a source of spiritual strength from which it has again and again drunk new life.

The period from the Renaissance to the end of the ancien régime shows an unending series of great soldiers and army commanders. But in the first half of the period we cannot yet claim that they merited the expression "great strategist." Despite the mighty battles that we have encountered, the dimensions of the military events are not great enough, or, better expressed, the military aspect in the overall relationship of things takes place still more in the sphere of individual military deeds against the political background than in that unity of politics and military action that forms the nature of strategy.

The great strategists in the full sense of the word begin only with Gustavus Adolphus. In Wallenstein, the statesman and organizer play a greater role than the strategist as such. The great commanders of the school of Gustavus Adolphus, Cromwell, the series of great French marshals under Louis XIV, are surpassed in the memory of later generations by Eugene of Savoy and Marlborough. This period finds its summit and its conclusion in Frederick the Great. For a long time he was attributed a special position by being considered the precursor of Napoleon. We have now recognized this concept as false and rejected it. Frederick was not a precursor but one who brought a period to its end and highest point. It was only through Clausewitz's deeper philosophical understanding of the concept of strategy in combination with politics and his associated psychological analysis of the nature of army leadership that full understanding of the similarity as of the difference of the two masters of warfare has been defined. Clausewitz himself recognized this result of his reflections, but he did not carry it to completion. In a "report" that he wrote on 10 July 1827 and that is placed at the head of the work he left behind, *Vom Kriege*, he considers redoing this work once more from the viewpoint that there is a *double art of war*, that is, the one "in which the purpose is the overthrow of the enemy," and the one "in which one only intends to make a few conquests on the borders of the country." The "completely different nature" of these two efforts must always be separated from one another. Clausewitz died in 1831, before he could carry out this work. To fill out the lacuna that he left has been one of the purposes of the present work.

With the appearance of Clausewitz's works after his death in 1831, the Napoleonic period of the history of the art of war comes to a close, so

to speak. It leads into the new period to the extent that Moltke's ideas were built on the works of Clausewitz. This new period is defined in its content by the new technology, not only of weapons but also of transportation and all the resources of life, from the railroads and telegraph to the foodstuffs, which increased in such unlimited proportions in the course of the nineteenth century.

This is the point to which I wished to bring this work. What followed, included in the phenomenal rise of Prussia and its final collapse, will have to be undertaken later by others.

#### NOTES FOR CHAPTER IV

1. Lehmann, *Scharnhorst*, 1:254.

2. According to the supplement in Lehmann's *Scharnhorst*, 1:543, Prince Ferdinand of Braunschweig was perhaps the very first to express this idea of using the third rank for the skirmisher fight, when in January 1761 he commanded a general in the Hanoverian light troops to equip the third rank with grooved-bore muskets.

3. *Documentary Contributions to the History of the Prussian Army (Urkundliche Beiträge zur Geschichte des preussischen Heeres)*, Vol. 5, "The Combat Training of the Prussian Infantry of 1806" ("Die Gefechtsausbildung der preussischen Infanterie von 1806"), by Jany, 1903. Möllendorff's order reads as follows: "The position of the musket must be shown to the men better, so that they no longer lean their head against the stock and aim, as formerly, but press the butt against the shoulder, holding the head upright, and thus hold the musket horizontally as His Majesty the King primarily reminded them and commanded at this year's review." In 1807 the Reorganization Commission recommended the "introduction of stocks more definitely curved, which make aiming possible." Scherbening, *The Reorganization of the Prussian Army (Die Reorganisation der preussischen Armee)*.

4. *Life of Gneisenau (Leben Gneisenaus)*, 3d Ed., 1907. Supplemented by the article "New Information on 1813" ("Neues über 1813"), *Preussische Jahrbücher*, Vol. 157, July, 1914. "General von Clausewitz"; "The Prussian Officer Class" ("Der preussische Offizierstand")—both articles in the *Historical and Political Essays (Historische und politische Aufsätze)*, 2d Ed., 1907. "On Max Lehmann's Stein" ("Ueber Max Lehmanns Stein"), *Preussische Jahrbücher*, Vol. 134, 1908. "From Arminius to Scharnhorst" ("Von Armin bis Scharnhorst"), in the collection *In Defense and Weapons (In Wehr und Waffen)*, edited by von Caemmerer and von Ardenne.

5. Very well explained by Ommen, *The Conduct of War of Archduke Charles (Die Kriegführung des Erzherzogs Karl)*.

6. The same thing is reported by Valory of the Prussian cavalry in 1742, *Brandenburgisch-Preussische Forschungen*, 7:310. Valory wrote that an outstanding Prussian officer had told him that in the battle of Chotusitz, when the closely formed Prussian squadrons had reached the enemy, it was first necessary to shout to the men that they were to strike with their sabers. Frederick himself told the same thing to Count Gisors. Rousset, *Le comte de Gisors*, p. 105.

7. According to A. Müffling, *My Life (Mein Leben)*, p. 31.

8. Fr. Meinecke, *Life of Boyen (Leben Boyens)*.

9. These instructions are from the year 1809, and they were then assembled as training regulations in 1812. As a continuation of the distinction between line infantry and light infantry, there still also remained the difference between the musketeer (or grenadier) battalions and the fusilier battalions, but this difference can be passed over, since it had no practical significance.

10. The history of the wars of liberation has in no work been at the same time more extensively developed and more confused than by the *Memorable Recollections from the Life of the Imperial Russian General of Infantry Carl Frederick Count von Toll (Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem Leben des kaiserlichen russischen Generals der Infanterie Carl Friedrich Grafen von Toll)* by Theodor von Bernhardi. The book is excellently written, the author is a competent military analyst, and the papers left by Toll provided him the most valuable material—it is no wonder that for a long time his judgment enjoyed an almost saintly respect. I, too, long deferred to his authority and only by laborious research learned to overcome his prejudice, point by point.

11. Critical extremists have also pattered around with this great deed. In addition to my *Gneisenau*, these have also been very well rejected by Caemmerer in *The Wars of Liberation. A Strategic Survey (Die Befreiungskriege. Ein strategischer Ueberblick)*, 1907.