HELMUTH VON MOLTKE
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE
FIRST WORLD WAR

This book explores the influence of Helmuth von Moltke, Germany’s Chief of the General Staff between 1906 and 1914. Based largely on previously unknown primary sources, it analyses the General Staff’s role in military decision-making and Moltke’s relationship with Kaiser Wilhelm II, as well as the genesis of the Schlieffen Plan and Germany’s military and political reactions to the many pre-war crises. Moltke’s influence on Germany’s political decision-making is shown to have been decisive, helping to foster an increasingly confrontational mood.

The book takes specific issue with the common perception of Moltke as an ineffectual and reluctant military leader, remembered primarily for the defeat at the Battle of the Marne and his alleged adulteration of the Schlieffen Plan. It concludes that, on the contrary, he was both bellicose and ambitious, hoping for war ‘the sooner the better’ and playing a crucial role in the outbreak and early months of the First World War.

Annika Mombauer is Lecturer in European History, The Open University.
NEW STUDIES IN EUROPEAN HISTORY

Edited by
PETER BALDWIN, University of California, Los Angeles
CHRISTOPHER CLARK, University of Cambridge
JAMES R. COLLINS, Georgetown University
MIA RODRÍGUEZ-SALGADO, London School of Economics and Political Science
LYNDAL ROPER, Royal Holloway, University of London

This is a new series of scholarly monographs in early modern and modern European history. Its aim is to publish outstanding works of research, addressed to important themes across a wide geographical range, from southern and central Europe, to Scandinavia and Russia, and from the time of the Renaissance to the Second World War. As it develops the series will comprise focused works of wide contextual range and intellectual ambition.

Other titles in the series
Royalty and Diplomacy in Europe 1890–1914
Roderick R. McLean

Catholic Revival in the Age of the Baroque
Religious Identity in Southwest Germany, 1550–1750
Marc R. Forster

Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War
Annika Mombauer

Peter the Great
The Struggle for Power, 1671–1725
Paul Bushkovitch

Fatherlands
State-Building and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Germany
Abigail Green

The French Second Empire
An Anatomy of Political Power
Roger Price
Helmuth von Moltke at the time of his appointment as Chief of the General Staff of the German Army, 1906
HELMUTH VON MOLTKE
AND THE ORIGINS OF THE
FIRST WORLD WAR

ANNIKA MOMBAUER
For my Mother
## Contents

*List of illustrations*  
*List of maps*  
*Acknowledgements*  
*Hierarchy of ranks for officers in the German army before 1914*  
*List of abbreviations*  
*General map of Europe*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Military decision-making in Wilhelmine Germany</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke: ‘military genius’ and ‘reluctant military leader’?</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 From crisis to crisis: the international background to military planning in the pre-war years</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The July Crisis and the outbreak of war: the German perspective</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The General Staff at war</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion, Myths and Realities: Helmuth von Moltke and the origins of the First World War</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Bibliography*  
*Index*  

© Cambridge University Press  
www.cambridge.org
Illustrations

Helmuth von Moltke in 1906 (Interfoto Pressebild-Agentur, Munich)  
1 Scenes at the annual summer manoeuvres, 1899  
   a. ‘The Garde du Corps on Parade’ (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive, hu 68414)  
   b. The Kaiser (on horseback) talks to Archduke Franz Ferdinand (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive, hu 68471)  
   c. The Kaiser greets his staff officers. (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive, hu 68472)  
   d. The Kaiser with Moltke (left). (Courtesy of the Imperial War Museum Photograph Archive, hu 68473)  
2 Army manoeuvres, 1904. (Süddeutscher Verlag-Bilderdienst, Munich)  
3 Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, postcard c. 1914  
4 Kaiser Wilhelm II and Helmuth von Moltke, 1911 (Süddeutscher Verlag-Bilderdienst, Munich)  
5 North Sea cruise, 1912 (Süddeutscher Verlag-Bilderdienst, Munich)  
6 Helmuth von Moltke, 1912 (Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin)  
7 Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, postcard c. 1914  
8 Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg in military uniform, postcard c. 1916  
9 The mobilization order of 1 August 1914  
10 The Kaiser, with hand-written declaration, postcard c. 1914  
11 Wilhelm Groener during the First World War (Interfoto Pressebild-Agentur, Munich)  
12 Alexander von Kluck, postcard c. 1914
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>xi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 Karl von Bülow, postcard c. 1914</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Ludendorff with Hindenburg during the First World War (Interfoto Pressebild-Agentur, Munich)</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Erich von Falkenhayn, postcard c. 1915 (Interfoto Pressebild-Agentur, Munich)</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Maps

1. General map of Europe \hspace{1cm} page xv
2. The Schlieffen Plan \hspace{1cm} 73
3. The German advance of 1914 \hspace{1cm} 239
Acknowledgements

Over the years that it took to research and write the doctoral thesis that became this book, I have been fortunate in the help and support that I have received from many friends and colleagues in Germany and England – too many to mention them all here. I hope I have thanked them in other ways.

My primary debt is to my supervisor, Professor John Röhl, whose advice, expertise and encouragement have been invaluable. It was his enthusiasm for the history of Wilhelmine Germany that first made me decide to pursue my studies into the origins of the First World War. Moreover, I cannot thank John and Rosemarie Röhl enough for their kindness and friendship over the years.

My thanks are also due to my examiners, Professor Hew Strachan and Professor Jonathan Steinberg, and to Beryl Williams at the University of Sussex, for their advice and interest in the subject.

I am most grateful for the financial support that I received from the British Academy. Without it, I could not have undertaken the research on which this book is based. My thanks also go to the archives and libraries I have visited, including the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg, the Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Potsdam, the Geheimes Staatsarchiv, Berlin-Dahlem, the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes in Bonn, the Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv-Kriegsarchiv, Munich and the Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Dresden. The Photograph Archive of the Imperial War Museum kindly provided some of the illustrations in this book. I should also like to thank Rose-Marie von Berghes and Marie-Liza von Bethusy-Huc, Helmhut von Moltke’s granddaughters, for talking to me about their memories of their grandparents.

I am indebted to many friends and colleagues for reading parts of the manuscript at various stages, for their welcome suggestions for improvements, and for making additional material available to me. My particular thanks go to Dr Robert Foley, for his friendship, his military expertise,
and his interest in discussing Moltke with a non-military historian like me. Konrad Donat in Bremen has helped me enormously over the last years, providing me with valuable material on Moltke and Steiner, and with insightful comments on draft chapters. Dr Paul Lawrence has read the text with incredible attention for detail and has made valuable suggestions for improvements. He has been a greater help than he realizes.

Finally, like many historians who come to dedicate their first book, I, too, am indebted to my parents for putting up with such an unusual choice of profession and for supporting me in every way. By way of thanks, woefully inadequate, this book is dedicated to my mother, Sybille Ulinski, to whom I owe the biggest debt of all.
## Hierarchy of ranks for officers in the German army before 1918

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Army ranks</th>
<th>Approximate British equivalent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leutnant</td>
<td>Second Lieutenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberleutnant</td>
<td>Lieutenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hauptmann</td>
<td>Captain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberstleutnant</td>
<td>Lieutenant Colonel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oberst</td>
<td>Colonel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalmajor</td>
<td>Brigadier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalleutnant</td>
<td>Major General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>Lieutenant General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalsoberst</td>
<td>General</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalfeldmarschall</td>
<td>Field Marshal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

AA Auswärtiges Amt
AOK Armee-Oberkommando (Army High Command)
BA-MA Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, Freiburg
BayHSTA-KA Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv-Kriegsarchiv, Munich
BEF British Expeditionary Force
DD Die deutschen Dokumente zum Kriegsausbruch
GP Die große Politik der Europäischen Kabinette
HJ Historical Journal
HQ Hauptquartier (military headquarters)
HZ Historische Zeitschrift
Kriegsarchiv
Kriegsgeschichtliches Forschungsamt des Heeres
Nachlaß (papers)
NDB Neue Deutsche Biographie
Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen
Manuscript
Non-Commissioned Officers
Oberste Heeresleitung
Oberkommando Ost
ohne Datum (no date)
Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn
Public Record Office, London
Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Dresden
Tagebuch (diary)