

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

---

In a lecture to the Military Society in Berlin in 1888, Major August Keim of the *Kriegsakademie* (War Academy) gave his view of German military thinking near the close of the nineteenth century. To Keim, his army's approach to military education and thinking was one of intellectual openness that challenged past views of war. He spoke of how poorly commanded and thought out German maneuvers and war plans would appear to the generals of Prussia's past. Were Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick to inspect the German plan of operations for the Franco-German War, declared Major Keim, he would in all probability "find little satisfaction in a plan of campaign, according to the views of his time, so thoroughly unscientific and inadequate." If General Friedrich von Saldern, Frederick the Great's drillmaster, were to see the German maneuvers of 1888, he "would shake his head at the decay in tactics, over the complete lack of the finer comprehension of the true tactical art, which certainly [to von Saldern], consisted principally in permitting the genius for drill to shine in complex forms." Keim saw the negative impressions of past Prussian masters to be an indication of progress within the German army. To him, the orthodoxies of the day had constantly to be questioned in an effort to keep the German army ahead of its opponents, and the army should be kept free of all rigid tactical and strategic schemes. Finally, Keim said he hoped that "at the end of the next century" the German approach to preparing for war would be judged favorably.<sup>1</sup>

Toward the end of the "next" century, historian Martin Kitchen published an article examining German strategic thinking of the nineteenth century. Keim's hopes were to be dashed by Kitchen, who did not judge him and his colleagues favorably. Kitchen denied that the German army

<sup>1</sup> [August] Keim, "Kriegslehre und Kriegsführung. Vortrag, gehalten in der Militärischen Gesellschaft zu Berlin am 12 Dezember 1888," *Beiheft zum Militär-Wochenblatt* 1 (1889), pp. 1–2. Keim, a sometime journalist, later became one of Alfred von Waldersee's "pen hussars." After retiring from the army as a *Generalmajor*, he continued his political bent by becoming a leading member of the *Flottenverein* and later founding the nationalistic *Deutsche Wehrverein*.

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Introduction

possessed the very attribute of which Keim was so proud – intellectual openness. He wrote, “the development of German strategic thought is marked by a slow hardening of a subtle dialectical approach to military problems into a set of unchallenged axioms.”<sup>2</sup> In Kitchen’s view, from Carl von Clausewitz in the beginning of the nineteenth century to Alfred Graf von Schlieffen at the end of the century, the German approach to war had become more rigid and obsessed with purely military thinking, ignoring the changes in warfare that had occurred over the previous century. The German strategic thinkers, with Alfred von Schlieffen being Kitchen’s prime example, believed that the uncertainties could be removed from war if only enough planning was put in before war’s outbreak. “In pursuit of a perfect strategic plan,” he wrote, “general staff officers pored over railway timetables, examined production figures of industry, undertook countless exercises and manoeuvres, and produced reams of memoranda.”<sup>3</sup> The result was an “infallible key” to success – the so-called “Schlieffen Plan,” a purely military solution to Germany’s strategic situation. The Schlieffen Plan was based on principles that its author believed were constant, and thus provided Germany with a recipe for success. These principles, particularly encirclement and annihilation, in Kitchen’s eyes, became the philosopher’s stone of the German military, who permitted no questioning of their beliefs from within.

Martin Kitchen’s view that the *Kaiserheer*, or Imperial German army, was actually dogmatic and doctrinaire, and not intellectually open as Keim believed, echoes much of the literature concerning the German army before World War I. Historians have constructed a picture of a German army that was obsessed with winning a future war rapidly by means of one or two great “decisive” battles, battles that would disarm the enemy and allow Germany to dictate whatever peace terms it liked.<sup>4</sup> In the process, so the argument goes, German military intellectuals either did not identify or even ignored both the tactical and strategic lessons of recent wars such as the Anglo-Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War. German soldiers did not recognize the power of modern weapons and did not foresee the tactical stalemate that such weapons might bring. Moreover, German soldiers did not predict the consequences of fighting enemies whose armies numbered millions and who could draw upon the

<sup>2</sup> Martin Kitchen, “The Traditions of German Strategic Thought,” *International History Review* 1, 2 (April 1979), p. 163.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Gunther Rothenberg, “Moltke, Schlieffen and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment,” in Peter Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 296–325; and Detlef Bald, “Zum Kriegsbild der militärischen Führung im Kaiserreich,” in Jost Döffler and Karl Holl, eds., *Bereit zum Krieg: Kriegsmoralität im wilhelminischen Deutschland, 1890–1914* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1986), pp. 146–159.

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

resources of global empires. The result, according to this interpretation, was a strategy dominated by the “short-war illusion.”<sup>5</sup>

In painting this picture of the *Kaiserheer* most of historians have focused on the General Staff and its head, and the origins of Germany’s failed strategy and battlefield doctrine are generally found in the teachings of Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the Prussian General Staff from 1891 to 1905 and author of the infamous plan which bears his name. Gerhard Ritter, in his classic study of the Schlieffen Plan, wrote of Schlieffen as a “pure technician” who ignored the political implications of his war plan and thus sowed the seeds of Germany’s defeat.<sup>6</sup> Jehuda Wallach traced the origins of the “dogma of the battle of annihilation,” which kept German soldiers blind to other approaches, back to Schlieffen.<sup>7</sup>

However, while there is some truth in the opinions of historians such as Ritter, Wallach, and Kitchen, the Imperial German army defies such easy answers. Recent historiography has begun to present a more nuanced view of military thought within the *Kaiserheer*.<sup>8</sup> Even Alfred von Schlieffen, who indeed at first glance seems to be the archetypal narrow-minded strategist, was more complex than portrayed by the above historians. As the German army archives were destroyed during World War II, post-war historians have had to rely heavily on the interpretation of Schlieffen’s plans and ideas developed during the interwar period. Almost invariably, these interpreters of Schlieffen’s ideas were German soldiers. These men were motivated less by the desire to present a historically accurate picture of Schlieffen and his strategic plans, than by an aspiration to deflect blame for the German army’s defeat and to instruct German soldiers how to avoid a stalemate occurring in a future war.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The term was popularized by L. L. Farrar, Jr., *The Short-War Illusion: German Policy, Strategy and Domestic Affairs, August–December 1914* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1973).

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: A Critique of a Myth* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> Jehuda L. Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Dennis Showalter, “German Grand Strategy: A Contradiction in Terms?,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 2 (1990), pp. 65–102; Showalter, “From Deterrence to Doomsday Machine: The German Way of War, 1890–1914,” *Journal of Military History* 64 (July 2000), pp. 679–710; Antulio J. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers Before the Great War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000); Stig Förster, “Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871–1914. Metakritik eines Mythos,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 54 (1995), pp. 61–95.

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm Groener, an important officer in the General Staff during the war and Reichswehrminister after the war, was the most prominent member of this group. See his *Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1927); and *Der Feldherr wider Willen: Operative Studien über den Weltkrieg* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1931). Also a member of the “Schlieffen School” was Wolfgang Foerster, a writer for the Reichsarchiv. See his *Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1921) and *Aus der Gedenkwerkstatt des Deutschen Generalstabes* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1931).

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Introduction

Moreover, Schlieffen was but one of many strategic thinkers in Wilhelmine Germany, and, at the time, perhaps one of the least known.<sup>10</sup> By focusing narrowly on the General Staff and their plans, these authors have neglected other important streams of thought within the German army. After 1871, the German military journals were awash in debates over strategy and tactics.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, as one perceptive historian has noted, the volume of German military literature that appeared from 1870 to 1914 is so great that “to wade through the flood of technical and theoretical literature that appeared after 1870 could easily consume the worst years of one’s life.”<sup>12</sup> However, it is precisely within this “flood” of literature that we find the debates which foreshadowed the changes in German strategy and tactics during World War I.

Thus, this study begins by examining this alternative stream of thought, most of which originated from the experience of the Germans in the Franco-German War of 1870/71. While most accounts have focused on the decisive nature of this war, a number of prescient Germans recognized the challenges offered by the French *Volkskrieg*, or people’s war, of the second phase of the conflict to the traditional German approach to warfare described by the likes of Ritter and Wallach. However, this second phase of the war offered important lessons for discerning German observers such as Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz. Far from focusing purely on the decisive nature of the Franco-German War, these observers reacted to what they saw as a fundamental shift in warfare and a true problem for German strategy. In doing so, these military intellectuals developed alternative ideas about warfare, ideas that did not rest on the assumption of a short war ended by decisive battles, but instead on how Germany could fight and win a long-drawn-out war that comprised numerous, indecisive encounters.

The alternative ideas of these military intellectuals were seconded by one of Wilhelmine Germany’s most perceptive military commentators, Hans Delbrück. Delbrück, a professor of history at the Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, further challenged the accepted military wisdom of the day with his concept of *Ermattungsstrategie*, or “strategy of attrition,” which offered a different approach to the short-war model

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Rudolph von Caemmerer, in his influential book, *Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Wilhelm Baensch, 1904), never mentions Schlieffen.

<sup>11</sup> Already by 1859, the Germans produced 50 percent of the military literature in Europe. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994; originally published 1957), p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Jay Luvaas, “European Military Thought and Doctrine, 1870–1914,” in Michael Howard, ed., *The Theory and Practice of War* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 71.

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

prevalent within the General Staff. While Delbrück's writings ostensibly dealt only with historical matters, his work continually questioned the intellectual foundations of the army's assumptions about warfare and coincided with the crisis in strategy brought about by the re-emergence of *Völkskrieg*. This link was clearly understood by Delbrück, who applied his historical ideas to contemporary events, and to the army, who were struggling to deal with the challenges offered by modern, increasingly industrial warfare.

The results of these challenges to the accepted view of how wars would be conducted was the tentative birth of a new paradigm of warfare. Instead of the traditional concept of a war won quickly by the means of one or two "decisive" battles that annihilated the enemy's armed forces, thereby forcing the enemy to accept any peace terms, there now arose a vision, a nightmare to most, of a protracted war. This new form of war, brought about by the engagement of the entire nation in a "people's war," would be decided less by clear-cut battlefield victories, than by long-drawn-out battles that slowly sapped the resources of each belligerent. Wars would not be ended by a peace dictated by a clear winner, as most in the Kaiserheer believed, but rather would result in a negotiated peace without obvious winners or losers. Wars of the future would not be won by following the traditional *Vernichtungsstrategie*, or "strategy of annihilation," but instead by following some form of "strategy of attrition."

Yet despite these serious challenges to the German army's assumptions about warfare, the German military leadership continued to adhere to an operational approach and a strategy that assumed a short war. However, this was due less to a firm belief in the continued validity of the short-war model than the recognition that, given the vast economic and manpower resources available to their enemies, Germany could only hope to win a war that was short. Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger both wrestled with this difficulty during their tenures as Chief of the Prussian General Staff and both reached this conclusion. Rather than jettison their hope of a short war, their conviction that Germany could not win a long war led them to make all possible efforts to bring about a rapid conclusion to any future war. The result was a plan in which neither man had complete confidence and an attempt to increase the combat effectiveness of the army to the point where it could defeat its enemies even if out-numbered. Thus, both men were forced to continue to train the German army in an operational approach in which they no longer had complete faith.

Moreover, both Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger and their successor, Erich von Falkenhayn, were constrained by structural deficiencies within the government of the *Kaiserreich* and within the *Kaiserheer* itself, which

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Introduction

militated against developing a new strategic approach. As Chiefs of the Great General Staff, both occupied one of the most important positions within the army. They were responsible for developing Germany's war plan, advising the government on military matters, and for the intellectual development of the brightest officers in the army, their subordinates in the General Staff. However, there were great limits on the extent of their authority. At the governmental level, there existed no body that coordinated the various branches of the Imperial government. Informal consultation took the place of permanent cooperation. As a result, foreign policy decisions were often taken without consultations with the military leadership, and the General Staff certainly drew up its war plans with only minimal consultation with the Reich's political leadership.<sup>13</sup> Without open communication between the civilian and military leaders of the *Kaiserreich*, no coherent national strategy could be formulated. Assuming that the military knew what they were doing and afraid of a confrontation with a Kaiser who was jealous of his rights as "Supreme Warlord," the political leadership of the Empire left the army alone. For their part, unable to communicate their fears about a future war, the planners within the General Staff focused on areas they could control (like doctrine).

To make matters worse, the authority of the Chief of the Great General Staff was also constrained within the army. Although the General Staff was responsible for formulating German war plans, and hence German strategy, they had no authority over the structure of the peacetime German army. This responsibility fell to the various Ministries of War that represented the constituent armies of the *Kaiserheer* (although the Prussian Ministry of War was by far the largest and most important). These ministries decided on questions of army expansion, unit structure, weapons procurement, and even mobilization.<sup>14</sup> While these ministries consulted with the General Staff, the institutions often disagreed on important questions, and the desires of Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger were more often than not rebuffed.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the Ministry of War, the General Staff also had to contend with two other institutions

<sup>13</sup> For a good examination of this discord during the July crisis that preceded the outbreak of World War I, see Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 182–226.

<sup>14</sup> See H. O. Meisner, *Der Kriegsminister 1814–1914* (Berlin: Hermann Reinshagen, 1940) and Ludwig Rüdiger von Collenberg, "Die staatsrechtliche Stellung des preußischen Kriegsministers von 1867 bis 1914," *Wissen und Wehr* (1927), pp. 293–312.

<sup>15</sup> See Stig Förster, *Der Doppelte Militarismus: Die Deutsche Heeresrüstungspolitik zwischen Status-Quo-Sicherung und Aggression, 1890–1913* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1985). Cf. Michael Geyer, *Deutsche Rüstungspolitik, 1860–1980* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 83ff.

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

7

within the army: the Military Cabinet and the Commanding Generals of Germany's corps districts. The Kaiser's Military Cabinet controlled promotions and assignments, and consequently exercised great influence within the army.<sup>16</sup> The Commanding Generals of Germany's twenty-some peacetime army corps had considerable power within the army. These generally independent-minded men dictated the training that their troops would receive. Their ideas about warfare, often at odds with those of Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger, deeply influenced their subordinates.<sup>17</sup> Thus, even within the army, the role of the Chief of the General Staff was limited; he could influence, but not command. Indeed, the consequences of this command structure would cause great problems during World War I.

Once the plans for a short war devised by Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger failed at the battle of the Marne in September 1914, Imperial Germany at last found a strategic head willing to entertain the alternative ideas developed before the war. The new Chief of the General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, appreciated and accepted the changed nature of modern mass warfare. After recognizing that Germany could not win the war exclusively on the battlefield, Falkenhayn abandoned the traditional German strategic goals of achieving crushing battlefield success and instead attempted to convince the Reich's political leader, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, that a negotiated peace would have to be sought with at least one of Germany's enemies. Like Moltke the Elder toward the end of his career, Falkenhayn believed that victory on the battlefield could, at best, be a step to the negotiating table.

However, due to the weaknesses in Germany's strategic decisionmaking structure and to the opposition to this new concept of warfare before the war, Falkenhayn was left to develop from scratch the methods by which it could be implemented. Thus, the bulk of this study concentrates on Falkenhayn's effort to come up with such methods and his struggle to implement them in the face of opposition from within his own government and army. In the process, it traces the development of Falkenhayn's strategic goals and the means by which he hoped to achieve these goals during his time as Chief of the General Staff, beginning with the first tentative steps in the Russian offensive in 1915 and culminating with the

<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Schmidt-Bückeberg, *Das Militärkabinett der preußischen Könige und deutschen Kaiser* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1933).

<sup>17</sup> The role of the commanding generals within the intellectual life of the army has not been well examined. For an introduction, see Eric Dorn Brose, *The Kaiser's Army: The Politics of Military Technology in Germany during the Machine Age, 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Introduction

ultimate expression of his version of the strategy of attrition – the battle of Verdun.

Falkenhayn's strategic and operational concepts have suffered the same fate as the alternative ideas of warfare examined in the first part of this study: at best they have been distorted, but mainly they have been overlooked. Indeed, this disregard of Falkenhayn's ideas has come about for the same reasons that the alternative concepts from before the war have traditionally been ignored. His ideas were given short shrift by German authors in the interwar period who were focused on attempting to prove the validity of their own strategic and operational ideas. One of the greatest culprits in this process was a source used extensively by this study, the German official history of World War I – *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918: Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande*.<sup>18</sup> This fourteen-volume series is an excellent example of “traditional” military history. It provides perhaps the most detailed and the most authoritative narrative of Germany's land war.<sup>19</sup> However, as a source it is not without its problems. As Annika Mombauer has noted, its writers had a clear political purpose – to demonstrate the innocence of the wider German army in the defeat of 1918 by implicating certain individuals.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly for this study, the work was written largely by former General Staff officers and was intended to be a source from which Germany's soldiers could learn. As such, it is often prescriptive rather than purely descriptive, and it reflects the strategic ideas of its authors.<sup>21</sup>

This raises *Der Weltkrieg's* most significant problem, at least for this study. As most of its researchers and writers were former General Staff

<sup>18</sup> Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918: Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande* (14 vols.) (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1925–56); and Reichsarchiv, *Der Weltkrieg 1914–1918: Kriegsrüstung und Kriegswirtschaft* (2 vols.) (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1930). Several other series came out in the interwar period under the auspices of the Reichsarchiv, but these were usually written by former officers not directly associated with the Reichsarchiv. These were the *Forschungen und Darstellungen aus dem Reichsarchiv* (7 vols.), the *Schlachten des Weltkrieges* (38 vols.), and the *Erinnerungsblätter deutscher Regimenter* (250 vols.). See Hans von Haefen, draft of a letter dated 20 August 1928, in Haefen Nachlass, BA/MA, N35/24; and Erich Murawski, “Die amtliche deutsche Kriegsgeschichtsschreibung über den Ersten Weltkrieg,” *Wehr-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau* 9 (1959), pp. 513–531, 584–598.

<sup>19</sup> Prior and Wilson's assertion that *Der Weltkrieg* is flawed because it was “written entirely during the Nazi period” is patently false. Eight of the fourteen volumes were published before the Nazi seizure of power, and volume 9 was largely completed. Further, the files of the KGFA indicate that the Nazis had little influence over the writing of the remainder of the work. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Passchendaele: The Untold Story* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 219.

<sup>20</sup> Mombauer, *Moltke*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> In this, the Reichsarchiv was following a long German tradition. See Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning* (Providence, RI: Berg, 1991) for a discussion of the writing of history in the German army.

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

officers, many had very pronounced views on how the war should have been fought. The first seven volumes of *Der Weltkrieg* were written under the direction of Hans von Haefen.<sup>22</sup> During the war, Haefen had been one of the strongest supporters of Erich Ludendorff and his idea of *Vernichtungsstrategie*, or “strategy of annihilation.” As such, he was one of Falkenhayn’s most bitter opponents. Indeed, during the war, he had actively worked to have Falkenhayn removed and replaced with Ludendorff.<sup>23</sup> After the war, Haefen brought his wartime beliefs to the writing of the official history.<sup>24</sup> In addition to Haefen, who as editor of *Der Weltkrieg* had the most impact on the interpretations contained within the work, the President of the Reichsarchiv, Hermann Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim, was also a wartime opponent of Falkenhayn.<sup>25</sup> The result of this was a bias against Falkenhayn and his operational and strategic ideas throughout the official history.<sup>26</sup>

The Reichsarchiv was not alone in its criticism of Falkenhayn’s strategy. As we have seen, the post-war period saw a renaissance of Schlieffen studies, which attempted to demonstrate that if Germany had only followed the teachings of its former Chief of the General Staff (as these “teachings” were interpreted by a select number of Schlieffen’s “disciples”), then the war would have ended in a German victory.<sup>27</sup> Those who had deviated from Schlieffen’s ideas, such as Moltke the

<sup>22</sup> Helmut Otto, “Der Bestand Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres im Bundesarchiv-, Militärisches Zwischenarchiv Potsdam,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 51 (1992), p. 430.

<sup>23</sup> See Ekkehart Guth, “Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost und dem Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres 1914/15: Die Rolle des Majors von Haefen im Spannungsfeld zwischen Hindenburg, Ludendorff und Falkenhayn,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 1 (1984), pp. 75–111.

<sup>24</sup> For the most blatant example of this, see the transcript of a planning meeting for Band VIII of *Der Weltkrieg* in which Haefen said the volume should proceed from the assumption that Falkenhayn’s strategy “had led us to catastrophe.” “Protokoll über die Besprechung bei Herrn General von Haefen am 6. Dezember 1930,” BA/MA, W10/51408.

<sup>25</sup> Mertz had served from 1914 to 1916 as the first General Staff officer (Ia) of Kronprinz Rupprecht’s 6th Army. Rupprecht and his staff played a key role in undermining Falkenhayn’s position as Chief of the General Staff. Mertz brought these wartime grudges with him to his post-war position. See Mertz to Foerster, 4 January 1935, BA/MA, W10/51523. Mertz was succeeded as president by Haefen in 1931.

<sup>26</sup> This bias was noticed by many former officers who commented on drafts of the Reichsarchiv’s work. For example, see Eugen Ritter von Zoellner to Reichsarchiv, 10 June 1930, BA/MA, W10/51305; and Hermann von Kuhl to Reichsarchiv, 7 January 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523.

<sup>27</sup> The beliefs of the “Schlieffen School” were conveyed in the memoirs of some of the war’s key participants. For example, see Hermann von Kuhl, *Der deutsche Generalstab in Vorbereitung und Durchführung des Weltkrieges* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1920); Max Bauer, *Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat* (Tübingen: Osiander’sche Buchhandlung, 1921); and Max Hoffmann, *Die Aufzeichnungen des Generalmajors Max Hoffmann* (ed. Karl-Friedrich Nowak) (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1929).

Cambridge University Press

0521841933 - German Strategy and the Path to Verdun: Erich von Falkenhayn and the Development of Attrition, 1870-1916

Robert T. Foley

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Introduction

Younger and Falkenhayn, were castigated, and any strategy other than *Vernichtungsstrategie* was considered a false path. Even more than the Reichsarchiv work, this literature was prescriptive in nature, as these authors tried to inculcate a new generation of German officers with the “proper” operational and strategic ideas, which would prevent a repeat of the indecisiveness of World War I.<sup>28</sup>

The post-war case for Falkenhayn’s strategic and operational approach was not helped by the fact that he never developed a “school” of his own within the army which could rally to the defense of his ideas after the war. This was the result of several factors. First, he had not served long within the General Staff before taking up the strategic reins of Germany’s war effort, and, crucially, the time he did serve was after Schlieffen had retired. Thus, unlike the proponents of *Vernichtungsstrategie* during the war, Falkenhayn did not have a network of trusted colleagues and subordinates with whom he had worked and shared experiences for years. Poor choice of personnel to staff the OHL when he took over from Moltke the Younger and his lack of interpersonal skills ensured that he did not build up an effective network during his time as Chief of the General Staff. As a result, Falkenhayn’s approach to the conduct of the war did not find many defenders in interwar Germany.<sup>29</sup>

With such an authoritative work as *Der Weltkrieg* biased against Falkenhayn and his concept of the strategy of attrition, as well as the criticisms of his ideas that came from the “Schlieffen School,” it is hardly surprising that a good deal of the secondary literature has continued along this path.<sup>30</sup> With the destruction of the German army archives during World War II, a re-examination of the traditional interpretation of Falkenhayn’s wartime ideas has proved problematic, and, until recently, it has been thought that writing a thorough history of Germany’s military operations during World War I would be impossible.<sup>31</sup> Research from primary sources about the German side of the war was restricted to those archives that had survived the destruction of zealous censors and

<sup>28</sup> This aim was freely admitted by Groener, who wrote of his works, “I do not write for history . . . I write for the future, because I fear that our hollow-heads will make improvements for the worse in the strategy of the next war, as happened in the world war.” Groener to Gerold von Gleich, 16 May 1935, quoted in Wilhelm Groener, *Lebenserinnerungen* (ed. Friedrich Freiherr Hiller von Gaertringen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), p. 16.

<sup>29</sup> After the war, Falkenhayn tried to enlist some of his former subordinates in his battle to defend his reputation, but had little success. See BA/MA, Nachlass Gerhard Tappen, N56/2; Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1994), pp. 500–517.

<sup>30</sup> For example, see B. H. Liddell Hart, *Reputations: Ten Years After* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1928), pp. 43–69; Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 195ff.

<sup>31</sup> For a recent example of this belief, see Prior and Wilson, *Passchendaele*, p. 219.