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Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow Edited and Translated by C. Malorti de Martemont

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### **The Spirit of the Modern System of War**

Dietrich Heinrich von Bülow (1757–1807) served for sixteen years in the Prussian army, but for the remainder of his life lived a varied existence as a theatrical manager, preacher, writer, businessman, debtor and finally prisoner. It was not until after his death that this work, written in 1799 and reissued here in its 1806 English translation, began to find favour. He advocates the use of mathematical principles in devising swift and decisive tactics, and was one of the first theoreticians to regard tactics and strategy as separate concerns. At a time when Germany and Italy were yet to be unified, he writes that expansion to ‘optimum’ size would result in a Europe of only twelve states. The book’s theories were criticised by Napoleon and Clausewitz, but had a considerable influence on the Prussian and Austrian armies of the late nineteenth century, and it is regarded as one of the founding texts of modern geopolitics.

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# The Spirit of the Modern System of War

DIETRICH HEINRICH VON BÜLOW  
EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY  
C. MALORTI DE MARTEMONT



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THE  
SPIRIT  
OF THE  
MODERN SYSTEM OF WAR.

BY  
A PRUSSIAN GENERAL OFFICER.

WITH  
A Commentary;

BY  
C. MALORTI DE MARTEMONT,

KNIGHT OF THE ROYAL AND MILITARY ORDER OF ST. LOUIS, AND  
CAPTAIN IN THE FRENCH ROYAL ARTILLERY; MASTER OF  
FORTIFICATION AND ARTILLERY IN THE ROYAL  
MILITARY ACADEMY AT WOOLWICH.

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THE  
COMMENTATOR'S PREFACE.

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THE work which I now offer to British Officers in their own language came originally from the pen of a Prussian General, who, if we may depend upon the editor of the bad French translation of it, which, in spite of its innumerable errors, has had an immense circulation in France, unites to the advantage of being distinguished for his military knowledge, that of being honoured with the confidence of a prince of the North of Germany, illustrious for his talents in war, and for his virtues. With respect to myself, I candidly own I

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## ii

am entirely ignorant of the military reputation, connections, and even of the name of the author, who has probably been induced by particular reasons, which in reading his work it is not difficult to guess, to publish his book anonymously\* : all that I can say is, that, hearing from different persons of the sensation it had caused on the continent, I procured a copy of it, and thinking it, on perusal, deserving in many respects the praise bestowed upon it, I determined to publish it in English, with a comment of my own.

I am far, however, from always coincid-

\* I know, from high authorities, that when this work appeared in Prussia, where it excited a great sensation, it was attributed to three different general officers; but which of the three was the author was not positively known. Since then, two French works, in speaking of it, have formally mentioned General Bulow as the author, previously well known by several other highly-esteemed military works.

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## iii

ing with the author in opinion. The principles which he establishes, as fundamental points of the modern system of war, appear to me almost always consonant to the sound maxims of the art of war, according to the practice of our days; and, in this view, I find the work the more useful, from its treating of those principles in a manner entirely new, and which greatly facilitates the understanding of them; but I cannot see many of his inferences in the same light: for example, to pretend that an art, so subject to political, moral, and physical influences as that of war is and ever will be, whatever system prevails, will one day become, in consequence of the modern system of war, metamorphosed into science, and reduced to invariable rules; to conclude, that all the knowledge relative to this *art*, become

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*science*, will be circumscribed in so narrow a sphere, that it will no longer furnish any stimulus to emulation, or excite an ambition to possess it, and that consequently men of genius will prefer directing their attention to objects of more general utility; to affirm that a certain number of Powers, dividing Europe among them, will extend themselves to their natural limits, beyond which they will not dare to expose themselves, and that from this order of things will arise a perpetual peace, the foundation of universal happiness, &c. &c. are some of those dreams created by an ardent imagination, which, hurried away by the impetuosity of its spring, never stops to examine how far calculations, founded on theoretic data, are admissible in practice. Indeed, according to the description which the au-



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thor has been pleased to give of a Frenchman\*, I should have suspected him to be my countryman, if I had not been informed that he was a Prussian.

The art of war, certainly, will never become simply a science. The fundamental principles of it may, indeed, hereafter be demonstrated in a more simple manner than has hitherto been done, and by a method similar or analogous to that of the author; but, be the existing system what it may, those principles must ever, and necessarily, be modified in the application of them, by political, moral, and physical causes: and men of genius will always find room, in the profession of arms, to display and exert the talents they may have received from nature or acquired by study, and therefore their ambition to learn and their emulation will remain the

\* See page 276.

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same. Allowing, on the other hand, that Europe should be one day divided among a certain number of great Powers, and that by this division those Powers were confined in what the author calls their natural limits, that event, which by the way I think very possible, would still not be followed by perpetual peace, though perhaps it would render wars less frequent; for, even admitting what the author says, that after such a division each Power, so taking its share of Europe, would be circumscribed within the limits prescribed to it by nature, and beyond which it could not attempt an offensive war, without being exposed to all the disadvantages of an insufficient base, of lines of operation in danger, &c. &c. the fear of those obstacles would vanish before the influence which the passions possess over the heart of man, and the Power that was inclined

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to attack another, would flatter itself that it would be able to counterbalance them by manœuvres more ingenious than those of his adversary, or by some other means; now, the passions will exist as long as men exist, and, consequently, while there are men there will be wars.

It is not the less true, however, that the General's work is that of a man of genius; and also, in spite of some systematic notions which appeared to me to admit at least of a discussion, that of a man perfectly acquainted with war, the fundamental principles of which he demonstrates, as I have already said, in a manner entirely new, clear and easily understood: I say fundamental principles, for as to the modifications depending upon local, political, or moral circumstances, genius and the *coup*

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*d'œil* are the only masters that can teach them.

I consider this work, then, taken altogether, as being of unquestionable utility; particularly to those officers whose military knowledge is still confined to the circle of Tactics, and who wish to extend it, by making themselves acquainted with the fundamental principles on which (excepting, let me repeat, the modifications depending on local and other circumstances) the offensive and defensive operations of armies are prepared and directed in the modern system of war. The general notions they will here acquire, will unfold their ideas relative to those operations, and even were those notions to be of no other use to them, than that of enabling them to read with advantage the productions of the great masters of the art in

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the ancient as well as modern system of war \*, or such as relate the actions of those masters, that alone would render the work of great moment to them. In fact, throughout all the armies in Europe, let Vegetius, Polybius, Folard, Montecuculli, Turenne, Lloyd, Tempelhoff, the Campaigns of the King of Prussia, and other works more modern, even those which relate to the wars of the French Revolution, be put into the hands of the Officers I am speaking of, and they will most frequently see in them only ideas of Tactics, or historical facts, which will contribute nothing to the enlargement of their

\* It may appear extraordinary to some young officers, that in a work intended to explain the modern system of war, I should mention, as an advantage, the being able to read those which relate to the ancient system; but let those who have served long enough to complete their professional knowledge, determine how far a critical examination of the latter contributes to develop the former system.

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professional knowledge, because they would not be able to understand the causes which produced them. Such works suppose rather than give the knowledge of the elementary principles, without which it is impossible to analyze them, and sometimes even to understand them. Indeed, those Officers in reading the history of a campaign will see that the armies set out from such and such points; that they marched to such other points; that such movements, such battles, such retreats, &c. took place: but I may still ask what professional advantage will they derive from the knowledge of those facts, if, while they learn them from history, they are not able to reason on the causes which produced them, or to account for them? And could they reason on those causes, if they are unacquainted with the principles on which the operations of armies ought to

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be conducted? It is therefore necessary, before every thing else, to attain a knowledge of those principles, of such at least as may be considered as fundamental principles, and from which it is necessary not to deviate, unless induced or compelled to it by peculiar circumstances, respecting which no rules can be given, as I have already observed. Now, I know no works which explain and unfold those fundamental principles by so simple and easy a method as that of the Prussian General.

The author likewise analyzes the most important operations of Tactics, and discusses the advantages and defects of those that are the most generally admitted; he then takes a view of the principal military events which have occurred since the introduction of the new system of war among the European nations; he examines the most celebrated campaigns,

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among others those of the King of Prussia, Frederick II. He also reviews those of Dumourier, in the war of the French Revolution. His examination furnishes him with new proofs of the justness of his arguments; with new grounds for his assertions; and, from the censure or praise he bestows on the masters of the art, he draws instructive lessons, which contribute to render his work extremely interesting.

Though several of the military combinations of the author have been already verified, there are still some which coincide less with the events that have taken place in Europe since the publication of his work. The late gigantic campaign of the French seems even to weaken the force of his reasonings, in the demonstration of the justness of the fundamental principles of the art of war, as he has laid them down; but the author, as a man well informed, has grounded those



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reasonings and those principles on probable data; he did not take into his calculations extraordinary incidents, such as those, for example, to which the campaign I allude to has given rise, and which, being too improbable to be taken into any kind of reasoning, certainly prove nothing, notwithstanding their results, in opposition to the principles laid down by the author. I even dare affirm, that the French would have severely felt the application of those principles, if a fault in the outset, occasioned by too much precipitation on one side, had not rendered the commission of others inevitable: but it is not my intention to expatiate on this subject.

I have taken upon me to add a commentary; sometimes for the purpose of displaying, in a more circumstantial manner than the author has done, certain important principles, which, in my opinion, he

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has laid down in too general a way; sometimes in order to render his demonstrations clearer and more intelligible, where they appeared to me to require it; and sometimes in order to discuss some of his important positions, of the justness of which I was not sufficiently convinced. From the clashing of opinions light is often struck, and, far indeed from presuming to pronounce my mode of thinking preferable to his, I leave to the reader to decide between us.

One of the assertions of the author, which, on account of the importance of the object to which it relates, and of the objections I think I may justly make to it, seems to me to demand a serious discussion, is, that in order to render the service of the columns of attack ineffectual (*see pages 174 and 175*) the adversary must not wait their shock, but withdraw aside

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of them, so as to menace their flanks. There is no doubt that columns can break only troops before them, and that an enemy, by taking a side position, may avoid their shock; but would he not in so doing expose himself to a greater danger than that of direct resistance? This question I propose to examine here\*.

But, before I enter fully on this subject, it is necessary to examine another proposition of the author's. He says, it is no great misfortune for an army to be broken in its centre. I beg leave to refer the reader to page 105 for the demonstration, which would doubtless be a very satisfactory one, if it were to be supposed

\* According to the plan I had laid down, and which I have generally followed, the commentaries should all be annexed to the passages to which they relate, in the body of the work; particular circumstances, however, of no importance to the reader, have obliged me to introduce some here. I beg his indulgence for this irregularity, which it has not been in my power to avoid.

that the enemy *cd* (*fig. 33, as referred to in the text*) had attempted to break the army *AB* in the centre, without having taken precautions to check the wings *A* and *B*, and that, after succeeding in his attempt, he inconsiderately resolved to advance; but such a supposition is not to be entertained, and it is clear that *cd* would not fail, before the attack, to place corps opposite to each of those wings, in order to prevent their movements against the flanks of the attacking troops: nay, he might have had it in his power so to place those corps, as to make the wings fear being turned by them; and, in either case, it seems evident to me that, during the wheeling which the separated parts *e, f* of *AB* would have to make, and which it would be very long for the troops nearest the centre to execute, even according to the method of changing front, explain-

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ed by the author, page 128\*, those separated parts would be very much exposed to be taken in flank, and perhaps in rear, by the corps of the wings, which would be enabled, by a very short movement, to execute this manœuvre. Now, does not the author himself, again and again, in the course of his work, tell us the imminent danger of an army, when turned on its flanks, even by a very inferior force? I know that *e* and *f* will not execute their wheeling without the precaution of having their flanks protected by troops; but if those troops are defeated, and the vic-

\* This method seems to me well adapted to a number of troops not very considerable, and the French in the last war often successfully made use of the *running step*. But I much doubt its being equally adapted to a line of great extent, and it is to be regretted that the author omitted to mention the numerical force of the raw troops, whom he thus saw change their front *in the twinkling of an eye*, which it would be very important to know.

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tors, pursuing rapidly their advantage, come up with  $e, f$ , while they are manœuvring, how will they effect their eccentric retreat? Besides, cannot  $c d$  have them attacked at the same time in front, were it only by *Tirailleurs*? By what means then could  $e, f$ , whose front and flanks would be assailed at once, prevent  $c d$  from advancing? And if he advances, how will they be able afterwards to unite again, as the author says, in a direction parallel to their former front? For, besides that  $c d$ , who moves perpendicularly to his front, has great advantages, by which he can anticipate  $e, f$ , at the point where they would attempt their junction, it is also to be remarked, that they cannot effect it without exposing the flank one way or other; for, if they face the wing corps,  $c d$  will then be upon their flank. It seems to me evident then, that  $e, f$ , will be cut off from each other, if  $c d$