

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gordon Craig. *The Battle of K niggr tz: Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. 211 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1844-2.

Reviewed by Ian Reifowitz (Historical Studies, SUNY-Empire State College)

Published on H-German (May, 2004)

This book examines the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, also known as the Seven Weeks' War, and focuses on the military campaign in Bohemia in which Prussia faced Austria (allied with Saxony) and which culminated in the clash that gives the book its title. Craig does not examine the Italian theater of that war, although he does provide a basic summary of the diplomatic maneuvers that preceded hostilities between Austria, Prussia, the other German states, France, and Italy. In terms of structure, the first chapter compares the two armed forces, while the second examines the diplomatic movements and large-scale strategic decisions that preceded the fighting. The next six chapters discuss the fighting in the days leading up to Koeniggratz (chapters 3-4), and then the battle itself (chapters 5-7). The final chapter offers a thorough discussion of the political consequences and military lessons learned (and not learned) from the battle.

Craig's book originally appeared in 1964 as part of the Great Battles of History series published by J. B. Lippincott Company, and has been reissued by the University of Pennsylvania Press. The book contains no explicit mention of its purpose; but as part of such a series it may have been conceived less as a primary source-based monograph than a narrative aimed at a broader audience interested in military history. No publisher's preface appears in the new version that might explain why the text is being reissued. In fact, literally no changes appear to have been made to the original 1964 edition. Errors in the indexing, for example in most of the page numbers listed for General Karl Friedrich von Steinmetz, have not been fixed. For such problems the publisher, not the author, must be held responsible.

Why Prussia won and Austria lost this final round of

their struggle for mastery of Germany are the overriding analytical questions the book examines. Craig first compares the armies of the two German powers in total, and concludes that the Prussian army was superior in terms of organization, tactics, training, and equipment. The author also contrasts Prussia's rigorous application of the principle of universal service with that of Austria, where one could purchase a substitute for service at a cost of 1000 gulden, a path many of Emperor Franz Joseph's most talented subjects chose. Furthermore, Craig contends that the superior Prussian educational system produced soldiers better able to maintain military discipline. A greater degree of cultural and linguistic homogeneity gave an advantage to the Prussian forces over the much more diverse Habsburg troops.

The Prussian army also benefited from a revolutionary new piece of military hardware, the needle gun. Craig maintains that the failure of Vienna to equip its military with this weapon, despite the urging of some of its officers, proved a "costly mistake" (p. 9). However, it was not decisive. He emphasizes a series of tactical errors by Austrian military leaders as equally important.

Another of the important questions relating to Koeniggratz was the role of Austrian leadership, in particular the commander of forces in Bohemia, *Feldzeugmeister* Ludwig Benedek. Craig probes the question of whether Benedek or another talented officer, the Emperor's uncle Archduke Albrecht, should have been placed in command of the Bohemian theater. According to "the best judges" (p. 12), Archduke Albert was the better soldier. In order to avoid the appearance of favoritism, in particular if Austrian forces were defeated by Prussia in the war's primary arena, Albrecht was named

commander of the Italian theater. Benedek had had a glorious career and was more popular than Albrecht, so Franz Joseph gave him the northern theater, an appointment that proved calamitous for the Austrian cause. Craig only lightly prods the Emperor, saying that he basically had little choice under the circumstances.

Throughout his analysis of the campaign, Craig contrasts Benedek's performance as commander with that of his Prussian counterpart, General Helmuth von Moltke. In terms of overall strategy as well as the tactical decisions each made at various points, Moltke proved to be a decisively better general. Craig offers great praise for Moltke for having broken out of the previous mindset in terms of military strategy.

The author relates the errors of the Austrian leadership in terms of grand strategy, in particular the decision not to move its forces northward in order to maximize the strength and resources of its allies, especially Saxony, early in the war, before Prussia could occupy their lands. Craig also details a series of tactical errors that together spelled disaster for Vienna. The campaign's decisive moment was the opportunity Benedek had to destroy one of the main wings of the Prussian Second Army, General von Steinmetz's Prussian V Army Corps on June 28. The Austrian refused to alter his prearranged battle plans, which had his forces advancing west to meet Prince Frederick Charles' First Army before it could link up with the bulk of Crown Prince William's Second Army. Most of his subordinates, including his head of intelligence, Colonel Karl von Tegetthoff, practically begged him to turn east against Steinmetz, who was closer and more threatening, but temporarily unsupported due to the defeat and retreat of General Bonin's Prussian forces by Lt. Field Marshal Gablenz at Tratenau. This opportunity offered Austria its best chance at victory of the entire campaign, and Craig condemns Benedek for not taking advantage of it.

Craig lays a number of other blunders at Benedek's feet. In one particularly brutal example of his incompetence, Benedek responded to a call for reinforcements by Gablenz after his victory at Tratenau by ordering a detachment sent, informing Gablenz, and then countermanding the order without informing Gablenz, who proceeded to advance his troops counting on support that never came. The results were disastrous for the Austrians. However, for his conduct in the late afternoon, after the battle had already been lost largely as a result of his previous mistakes, Benedek's bravery earns strong praise from Craig, mostly for his success in safely extracting

180,000 of his troops at day's end.

In the midst of discussions of strategy and tactics, the book contains some wonderful detail. Craig tells the story of how Colonel Prince von Hohenlohe, in a pique after receiving orders he found unsatisfactory on the morning on June 28, stuffed his pockets with sandwiches that saved him from a serious wound later in the day when a bomb exploded underneath his horse.

This book is largely a discussion of battlefield strategy from the perspective of commanders. More recently Geoffrey Wawro published a different kind of study of this campaign as part of his larger analysis of the whole war, including the Italian theater.[1] Wawro sketched in broad strokes the historiography of the Seven Weeks' War since 1866, largely dismissing Craig's book as being based solely on published material, as opposed to his own, for which he researched various state and military archives in Austria, Italy, Hungary, France, Britain, and Germany. Wawro argues that his book broke new ground in that, in addition to the official archives, he used private diaries and field correspondence from Austrian army. As a result of his research, he concludes that the Habsburg army's defeat resulted overwhelmingly from the incompetence of Benedek, a verdict he contends differs from traditional interpretations that offered a number of reasons, including the overwhelming numbers of the enemy, superior Prussian rifles, unhelpful allies, lack of funds from parliament, etc. Wawro goes on to condemn more broadly the kind of system that would place such a poor strategist in command of the Bohemian campaign, and his work offers a much more thorough analysis of that system than does Craig, who chooses to focus largely on the battle itself. While Wawro's work certainly relies on a much stronger archival base than that of Craig, it seems that the latter does place a similarly strong amount of responsibility for Austria's defeat on Benedek. While Wawro is more vehement in his condemnation of the general, it would seem that the difference is one of degree rather than kind, and that Craig's conclusions have held up reasonably well.

Certainly, the field of military history has transformed since the initial publication of this book, and Wawro's work has become the new standard resource on the topic with good reason. Nevertheless, Craig's narrative remains a highly readable, traditional telling of the story of one of the most important battles in European history.

Note

[1]. Geoffrey Wawro, *The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Copyright (c) 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work

for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Ian Reifowitz. Review of Craig, Gordon, *The Battle of Königgrätz: Prussia's Victory over Austria, 1866*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9278>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.