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## Reports from the Theatre of War. Major Viktor von Lignitz and the Russo-Turkish War, 1877–78

The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 has not received the attention it deserves from military historians. Although the political significance of this conflict and the re-organization of the Balkans resulting from the Congress of Berlin have long been recognized as a pivotal event in European political history, the importance of the war itself as a major milestone in the history of European warfare has been largely ignored.<sup>1</sup> Wedged between the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 and the First World War, it demonstrated with sanguinary clarity how the rapid development of weapons systems was radically transforming battlefield tactics. In particular, the bloody struggle for the fortified Ottoman position around Plevna proved to be a kind of dress rehearsal for the trench warfare of 1914–1918. And although contemporary military leaders did not learn the lessons they should have from this conflict, there was nonetheless considerable interest across Europe in the war in the Balkans and staff officers hungrily analyzed reports from the theatre of war to glean as much useful information as they could about the changing face of a modern industrialized war.

Unfortunately, the records of what conclusions the continent's leading military power, the German Empire, had drawn from the war are, for the most part, no longer available. In general, the destruction of the Prussian *Heeresarchiv* in Potsdam in April 1945 has meant that historians have struggled to reconstruct the military history of Imperial Germany. In recent decades, considerable 'new' material has come to light in the form of transcripts of some of the lost originals. But the archival record for this critical period in the history of the German Army remains relatively sparse. For this reason, the discovery of any new complete blocks of original documentation, and in particular concerning the German perspective on the Russo-Turkish war, is of great importance. One place where copies of the destroyed original military documents have often been found is in the files of the Political Archives of the German Foreign Office (*Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes*). In particular, many reports from the military attachés stationed in foreign capitals have been preserved here. However, even in this repository the historical record is incomplete. As a general rule, only despatches from attachés concerning political matters were retained and these typically only in the form of copies or excerpts. Yet there is one important exception to this rule. Almost all of the original reports filed by the German military attaché in St. Petersburg, Major Viktor von Lignitz, during his tour of duty with the Russian army in its campaign against Turkey in 1877/78 were not handed over to the military archives. Instead they were kept in the files preserved in the Wilhelmstrasse.

<sup>1</sup> Recently there has been some increased scholarly interest in this subject: Quintin Barry, *War in the East: A Military History of the Russo-Turkish War 1877–78* (Solihull, 2012); M. Yavuz, ed., *War and Diplomacy: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 and the Treaty of Berlin* (Salt Lake City, UT, 2011).

This fortunate windfall for researchers was partly the result of chance and partly the result of design. But the net result is that military historians have access to over eighty detailed reports written largely on the front lines of the Russo-Turkish war by a senior staff officer with considerable combat experience. Although Lignitz's diaries concerning his experiences during the Balkan war were published almost a century ago<sup>2</sup>, they only tell part of the story and do not contain the details of his professional assessments which were of considerable interest to experts in Berlin. His personal account also downplays the important political aspects of his activities and provides no insights into the impact of his reporting on leaders back home. Given the problematic nature of the relationship between the military and civilian leadership in the *Kaiserreich*<sup>3</sup>, it is precisely the politics surrounding Lignitz's activities during the war that is of special historical significance. This dimension of his mission is also important as it helps to shed new light on Russo-German relations at this important juncture. From a more general perspective, Lignitz's actions during the war document an interesting transitional period in the development of the role of the military attaché. It was a time when these observers were becoming much more professional in their approach and were given a more formal definition of their duties.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as the chronicle of this particular mission will repeatedly illustrate, there was still considerable scope for enterprising officers, such as Lignitz, to define their own path, sometimes even in defiance of their own governments. For all of these reasons a closer look at this neglected military mission is long overdue and will hopefully encourage other researchers to take advantage of an important ›new‹ source of information for the military history of the much-neglected war of 1877/78.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the start of his fateful mission in the Balkans, Lignitz had already shown himself to be a gifted and capable officer both on and off the battlefield.<sup>6</sup> He was identified early on by his superiors as an individual who was suited for accelerated promotion through the ranks. As a result, he was sent at an early age to the Prussian *Kriegsakademie* (staff college) where he studied Russian and soon became fluent in that language. He took part in the Austro-Prussian war of 1866 as a 25 year old first lieutenant with distinction, receiving the Order of the Red Eagle. Shortly before the Franco-Prussian war he joined the Prussian General Staff and was assigned to the staff of the IX Army Corps during that conflict. He took part in many of the decisive engagements of that war including the bloody encounter battle at Mars-la-Tour where he displayed his initiative and self-confidence by ordering troops onto the battlefield at a critical point without authorization from his superiors. Lignitz was at first reprimanded for his audacity, but was later awarded the Iron Cross. During the campaign on the Loire against the conscript armies of the Republic, he won further laurels and in 1874 a grateful sovereign re-

<sup>2</sup> Viktor von Lignitz, *Aus drei Kriegen: 1866 – 1870/71 – 1877/8* (Berlin, 1904).

<sup>3</sup> For a general introduction to this subject see: Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640–1945* (Oxford, 1956); Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk: Das Problem des ›Militarismus‹ in Deutschland*, vol. 1, (Munich, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> Alfred Vagts, *The Military Attaché* (Princeton, NJ, 1966), 20–9.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these reports were already used in an interesting comparative study of the perceptions of military observers from various countries: Maureen P. O'Connor, »The Vision of Soldiers: Britain, France, Germany and the United States Observe the Russo-Turkish War«, *War in History*, 4 (1997): 264–295.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt von Priesdorf, ed., *Soldatisches Führertum*, vol. 9, (Hamburg, 1941), 155–8.

warded him for his valour through ennoblement. Soon after this honour was bestowed, Lignitz's reputation as a gifted officer and his knowledge of the Russian language resulted in a dramatic change in his career. In January of 1876, he was reassigned to the German embassy in St. Petersburg as military attaché.

In his new position, Lignitz's role was technically that of a subject matter expert on military matters and his reports were intended primarily for the Chief of the General Staff and the Minister of War. He did not, strictly speaking, have a diplomatic role. However, the political bond between Russia and Germany during these years still retained much of the dynastic and martial fabric of the past. So there was a strong element of military cooperation underlying the close political relationship between both countries. An example of this was the Russo-German Military Convention of 1873. This treaty, promising mutual armed support in a conflict, was negotiated and signed independently by the military leaders and rulers of both countries, but was not ratified by Bismarck.<sup>7</sup> This pronounced dynastic-martial component of the entente was further personified by the unique position of the Prussian Military Plenipotentiary in St. Petersburg. Although this was a military post filled by a senior officer, its function was more dynastic in nature and was thus different from that of an attaché although he performed both functions until 1876. Unlike the ambassador or the attaché, the Military Plenipotentiary was assigned directly to the Tsar and reported only to the German Emperor. There was a corresponding Russian officer in Berlin who was assigned in a similar fashion to the Kaiser.<sup>8</sup> During the Eastern Crisis, this role was played by General Bernhard von Werder who repeatedly drew the wrath of Bismarck as his role as a dynastic liaison often brought him into conflict with the wishes of the chancellor.

The German ambassador to St. Petersburg during this period, General Lothar von Schweinitz, was also a former Military Plenipotentiary and his switch to a diplomatic career had not really altered his fundamental mandate. He himself described his main task as conducting »aide-de-camp diplomacy« with a focus on cultivating a close relationship with the Russian ruler.<sup>9</sup> There can therefore be no doubt that the personal ties between both rulers and the traditional bond between the two armies still played an important role in Russo-German relations in the 1870s. Therefore, when Lignitz arrived on the banks of the Neva at the start of 1876 to commence his new assignment, the line separating political and military matters had been already systematically blurred.

But it should be noted that the appointment of Lignitz as a military attaché represented an important step in putting the military relationship with Russia on a more modern and professional basis. Up until 1876, the Military Plenipotentiary had played both roles.<sup>10</sup> It was, however, not always possible to find an individual

<sup>7</sup> Text of the convention in Johannes Lepsius, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Friedrich Thimme, eds., *Die große Politik der europäischen Kabinette 1871–1914: Sammlung der diplomatischen Akten des Auswärtigen Amtes* (Berlin, 1922), 1: 203 f.

<sup>8</sup> For more details on the role of the Military Plenipotentiary see: Heinrich Otto Meisner, *Militärattachés und Militärbevollmächtigte in Preußen und im Deutschen Reich* (Berlin/Ost, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> Wilhelm von Schweinitz, ed., *Denkwürdigkeiten des Botschafters General von Schweinitz* (Berlin, 1927), 1: x; Jörg Kastl, *Am straffen Zügel: Bismarcks Botschafter in Russland, 1871–1892* (Munich, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Meisner, *Militärattachés und Militärbevollmächtigte* (see n. 8). Meisner is not completely clear on this point. He acknowledges that Lignitz was designated as a military attache

capable of both cultivating a relationship at court and studying the minutiae of on-going developments within the Russian army, especially after the far-reaching reform launched in 1874 by the Russian Minister of War, Dmitri Miliutin.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, Lignitz's appointment in itself was a symptom of the changing relationship between Berlin and St. Petersburg. The traditional entente between both powers was taking on a more business-like tone.

However, the creation of the role of a distinct military attaché did not mean that the opportunities for soldiers to influence the conduct of international relations were eliminated. On the contrary, there is no question that Lignitz's dynamic personality played a significant part in making the new military attaché a challenge for the diplomats. One of the secretaries at the German embassy in St. Petersburg during these years described his military colleague as intelligent and industrious, but also as the »most ambitious careerist« (»*Streber*«) who had ever crossed his path.<sup>12</sup> This was a potentially dangerous combination. But the new military attaché seems to have quickly mastered the art of playing both of his superiors off against each other. Within the General Staff, they complained that Lignitz engaged in diplomacy too much and as a result did not pay enough attention to military matters. However, the soldiers did not want to remove him from his post as they believed that the Foreign Office considered him to be indispensable because of his political expertise. In the Wilhelmstrasse, on the other hand, senior bureaucrats complained that Lignitz was making their task more difficult because he was a dilettante in politics, but feared that the General Staff could not do without him because of his military acumen. His experiences during the Russo-Turkish War no doubt taught Lignitz some of these valuable survival skills as he frequently found himself caught between conflicting political and military priorities.

When Lignitz arrived in St. Petersburg at the start of 1876, the fighting in the Balkans was already escalating and threatened increasingly to involve the Great Powers, in particular Russia. What had started as a rising of Christians in the Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the summer of 1875 was gradually drawing in more belligerents.<sup>13</sup> In the spring of 1876 the Ottoman province of Bulgaria erupted in a revolt that was put down with great loss of life. In the summer of that year both Serbia and Montenegro entered the war. And in the case of Serbia, it soon became a »proxy war« as thousands of Russian soldiers and officers fought against Turkey as Serbian »volunteers«. Financial and material aid also streamed into Belgrade from across Russia. As a result, the decisive defeat of Serbia in the summer and autumn of 1876 brought with it the danger of direct Russian involvement in the hostilities as the Tsar ordered a partial mobilization of his armed forces.

In view of his obvious love of combat and his ambitious nature, it is perhaps not surprising that Lignitz quickly launched his own campaign to take part in the increasingly likely Russian military action in the Balkans and lobbied aggressively behind the scenes to ensure that there would be no delays in granting his re-as-

ché starting in 1876 (69), but argues the institution only came into existence in 1894 after the discontinuation of the institution of the Military Plenipotentiary (20).

<sup>11</sup> Werner Benecke, *Militär, Reform und Gesellschaft im Zarenreich: Die Wehrpflicht in Russland 1874–1914* (Paderborn, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Arthur von Brauer, Helmuth Rogge, eds., *Im Dienste Bismarcks* (Berlin, 1936), 53.

<sup>13</sup> For general background on the origins of the war: Mihailo D. Stojanović, *The Great Powers and the Balkans 1875–1878* (Cambridge, 1939).

signment when war broke out. These untimely efforts by the impatient attaché are of more than biographical interest. The discussions they triggered are of general historical significance as they highlight the dichotomy that existed during these years between the German Emperor's dynastic, military view of the relationship with Russia and Bismarck's more cold-blooded *Realpolitik* perspective. And this was to be a recurring theme during Lignitz's thirteen month assignment in the Balkans.

The young attaché's initiative came at a rather unusual juncture. In the autumn of 1876, diplomatic efforts were intensifying to avert war. A conference was to be held starting in December at Constantinople to agree on reforms to the Ottoman Empire that would protect Christians from further persecution and remove any pretext for Russian military intervention. However, it appears that Lignitz believed even at this early date that war was inevitable and his main concern was to make sure that he would be able to take part from the outset. On 28 October 1876, he therefore directed an official request to his immediate superior, General Werder, to be allowed to accompany the Russian army into battle.<sup>14</sup> He justified this somewhat premature action by arguing that he did not want to be caught off guard by a sudden outbreak of hostilities and thereby miss the crucial first weeks of hostilities. Lignitz also seems to have had powerful backers supporting his proposal. In his short time in St. Petersburg, he had succeeded in forming a close relationship with the designated supreme commander of the Russian forces in Europe, Grand Duke Nicholas, so he was confident that he would be invited to join his staff. The attaché's letter was passed on to General Schweinitz by Werder without any comment and the ambassador did not forward it to Berlin until the end of November.<sup>15</sup> Based upon this rather lukewarm reception, Lignitz's action does not appear to have been endorsed by his superiors in St. Petersburg.

This reluctance to support Lignitz's *démarche* may have been because both men foresaw that this move would not be received favourably in the Wilhelmstrasse. If this was the case, they correctly predicted the Chancellor's negative response. Bismarck's main reason for advising the Kaiser that Lignitz's request be rejected was that it would undermine Germany's stated position of strict neutrality in any conflict in the East.<sup>16</sup> He also expressed reservations regarding possible indiscretions involving German reports that were critical of the performance of the Russian armed forces. Underlying this latter concern was the Chancellor's apparent conviction that the Russian army would experience setbacks in the upcoming battles. Bismarck also emphasized his concern that leaders in St. Petersburg might suspect Berlin of sharing these sensitive assessments by her military observers with Vienna and London. Another reason he gave his ruler for declining the attaché's petition was that no official invitation had yet been extended. But even if one did come, Bismarck argued, he would still not be in favour of sending Prussian officers to join Russian headquarters.

There was certainly some justification for Bismarck's caution in sending a Prussian military observer to any future theatre of war. As a Prussian diplomat during the Crimean War, he still clearly recalled the refusal by Tsar Nicholas to allow a

<sup>14</sup> Lignitz to Werder, October 1876. R9941. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, Berlin (PAAA).

<sup>15</sup> Schweinitz to F.O., 23 November 1876. R9941. PAAA.

<sup>16</sup> Bülow to William I, 1 December 1876. R9941. PAAA.

Prussian officer to join his headquarters during that campaign.<sup>17</sup> It was therefore by no means certain that Lignitz's presence would have been welcome. However, considerations of this nature were almost certainly of a secondary nature. It is much more likely that Bismarck's opposition was primarily the result his determination to prevent overzealous Prussian officers from disturbing his delicate diplomatic maneuvering. This interpretation is reinforced by the position he had taken regarding the dispatch of German military experts to assist in the demarcation of the armistice lines to enforce the ceasefire between Turkey and the rebellious Ottoman vassal states of Montenegro and Serbia. He reluctantly agreed to send staff officers, but specifically requested that individuals be selected who were not overly ambitious or enterprising.<sup>18</sup> This caveat underlined his suspicions towards the Prussian military and reveals most clearly the real reasons for his strong resistance to sending Lignitz into the war zone: He was precisely the kind of ambitious officer he did not want involved in the region.

The response of William I to these recommendations by his Chancellor is highly instructive. Too often, Bismarck is portrayed as an all-powerful leader in the mold of the Bonapartes. It is often forgotten that the Kaiser was the head of state and jealously guarded his prerogatives, especially in military matters. When it came to his army, he was not inclined to defer to a civilian. In addition, his sympathies in the on-going Eastern Crisis were clearly with his nephew, Tsar Alexander II, with whom he strongly wished to show solidarity in the upcoming crusade against the infidel Turk. He viewed Lignitz's request almost exclusively from this perspective. Still feeling an obligation of gratitude to his nephew for Russia's support during the war of 1870/71, the Kaiser emphasized in his response that he wished to renew, at least symbolically, the »*Waffenbrüder-Gemeinschaft*« (»comradeship-in-arms«) that had existed between both countries since the formation of their alliance to defeat Napoleon I in 1813.<sup>19</sup> William I also convincingly argued that the Tsar had assigned a number of senior officers to the Prussian army in its war against France so that simple reciprocity seemed to dictate that his officers now join the Russian army. So instead of waiting for the Tsar to take the initiative, as Bismarck had suggested, he ordered his Military Plenipotentiary to sound out the Russian Emperor on this question and he made his decision regarding Lignitz's request dependent upon the answer he received.

It is therefore likely that some informal agreement was reached at the dynastic level in the months before the outbreak of war that Major von Lignitz was to accompany the Russian army in the event that it undertook a military campaign against Turkey. However, no further formal action was taken until after Russia declared war on 24 April 1877. And this time the initiative came from an unexpected source. General Schweinitz reversed his earlier position at the start of May 1877 and now strongly urged that Lignitz's earlier request for re-assignment to Russian Headquarters be approved for »military and political reasons«.<sup>20</sup> The main cause

<sup>17</sup> Vagts, *The Military Attaché* (see n. 4), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Bismarck to Bülow, tel. 81, 4 November 1876. R12732. PAAA; Bülow to Kameke (JNo. 3773), 6 November 1876. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bülow to William I, 1 December 1876 (Instructions and marginalia of William I). Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Schweinitz to F.O., 3 May 1877. R9941. PAAA. It is also possible that Schweinitz had some private motives for wishing Lignitz's departure. He viewed the reporting of the military attaché as a danger to Russo-German relations and requested that another officer be assigned to fill his duties while he was gone. Perhaps sensing the intention of the request,

for his change of heart appears to have been the invitation of the French military attaché to take part in the war. The ambassador felt that this new circumstance had made Lignitz's presence in the Balkans a political necessity. However, Bismarck remained opposed.<sup>21</sup> He also raised more fundamental objections to the Kaiser's dealing directly with General Werder and the Tsar to discuss questions that he considered to be of a highly political nature.<sup>22</sup> He repeated his concerns that Russia might be embarrassed by the presence of military observers and also raised the spectre of a Prussian officer possibly being caught up in hostilities between England and Russia. However, it was clear that William I was determined to make a gesture of solidarity with his friend and relative to whom he felt a huge debt of gratitude. At the same time it appears that Lignitz had used his connections at court to secure a personal invitation from Tsar Alexander II which Bismarck could not easily refuse.<sup>23</sup> The chancellor had no other option than to retreat gracefully. In the face of a fait accompli, he now claimed that he had only opposed taking the initiative in this question, but had no objections once it had become clear that the Tsar had personally invited Lignitz.<sup>24</sup> But Bismarck's resistance to the military mission had not gone unnoticed in St. Petersburg. As William I had correctly foreseen, Alexander II was surprised and annoyed by the German government's reluctance to take the initiative in this matter.<sup>25</sup>

There is no question that Bismarck continued to have serious reservations about the involvement of German officers in the war in the Balkans. He therefore managed to convince the Kaiser to agree to one important caveat. As few officers as possible were to be sent to minimize the risks. But he allowed the military mission to proceed. The Chancellor's ultimate decision to back down on this issue is likely attributable to a number of political factors. It would have certainly been risky in any case to oppose the wishes of the emperors of Russia and Germany. But this was probably not the decisive factor. One important consideration was undoubtedly a desire on Bismarck's part to repair the damage he had himself inflicted upon Russo-German relations in these weeks by his unexpected decision to normalize relations with Turkey by naming a new ambassador to Constantinople. The appointment of Heinrich VII Reuss as a special envoy to the Porte just as war was declared had deeply offended the Tsar and infuriated the Russian chancellor.<sup>26</sup> He likely saw granting Alexander II's wish to have Prussian officers join his troops as a way of rebuilding trust and offsetting an unwelcome diplomatic mission with a more welcome military one.

the Kaiser refused it. Schweinitz to Bülow, no. 170, 22 May 1877. R9941. PAAA; William I. to F.O., 26 May 1877. Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bülow to Bismarck, no. 6, 7 May 1877. R9941. PAAA.

<sup>22</sup> H. Bismarck to Bülow, 8 May 1877. R9941. PAAA. In Otto von Bismarck, *Gesammelte Werke: Neue Friedrichsruher Ausgabe* (NFA), eds. Konrad Canis et al., vol. 3, 1877–1878 (Paderborn, 2008), 98 f.

<sup>23</sup> Schweinitz to Bismarck, no. 158, 14 May 1877. R9941. PAAA; Werder to William I, 14 May 1877 (Note: In this case, only the copy that was made of Bismarck's marginal notes was retained in the archives of the Political Department. Both original reports were likely placed in the archives of the Military Cabinet and therefore destroyed in 1945. *Eingangsjournal*. 1877. PAAA).

<sup>24</sup> Bülow to William I, 18 May 1877. R9941. PAAA.

<sup>25</sup> Werder to William I. 18 May 1877. R9941. PAAA; Note by William I, 19 May 1877. Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> James Stone, »The Reuss Mission to Constantinople, 1877–8«, *The International History Review*, 34 (2012): 371–395.

Lignitz's mission was certainly the most important element of German military involvement in the Russo-Turkish War. However, he was not the only Prussian officer sent to join the Russian army. By virtue of his personal assignment to the Tsar, Werder was the first to gain approval to take part in the war. And, in compliance with Bismarck's request, the remainder of the military observer contingent was limited to two General Staff officers with the rank of Major: Karl von Villaume and Karl von Wedel.<sup>27</sup> Both of these men were to later enjoy distinguished careers as military attachés so they compensated in quality for their small number. Although they were on special assignment, the reports filed by all of these officers from the field had to go through numerous filters before they would be seen by the Kaiser. For example, Lignitz's reports were routed through the German consul in Bucharest at the start of the campaign and later through the German ambassador in Constantinople. In addition, Werder read each of these despatches before they were sent to Berlin and occasionally added annotations to clarify or correct the information they contained.

Lignitz left St. Petersburg on 24 May and reached Russian Headquarters by the end of May. Almost immediately after his arrival he began a distinct series of reports, each filed under the heading »Military Report from the Theatre of War«. During his journey to the front he was given his first opportunity to observe the Tsar's forces up close. As was the case for most of his mission, his assessment of what he had witnessed at this early stage was very balanced<sup>28</sup>:

Eine militärische Haltung nach unseren Begriffen ist weder bei den Mannschaften noch bei der Mehrzahl der Offiziere vorhanden. Mannschaften und Offiziere der rumänischen Armee [...] stechen gegen die der russischen günstig ab, ob ihr innerer Wert dem der russischen auch nur annähernd gleich kommt, muss zurzeit noch dahin gestellt bleiben [...] Die Zahl der von mir gesehenen Betrunknen war sehr gering. Eine Batterie [...] fiel mir durch ihre schlechte Marschordnung auf, die Kanonen waren unter den auf sie gepackten Mänteln und Ausrüstungsstücken als solche kaum zu erkennen. Eine Sanitätskolonne, welche ich heute von der Eisenbahn aus marschieren sah, war entschieden nicht unter der erforderlichen Disziplin.

A few days later he discussed further the often unmilitary comportment of the Russian troops, but concluded: »Ich glaube aussprechen zu müssen, dass die russischen Truppen ihrem inneren Wert nach viel besser seien als der äußere Anschein vermuten lasse.«<sup>29</sup> In general, the attaché found that the appearance of the Russian soldiers and their lack of discipline could not stand a comparison with their Prussian comrades, but at the same time he noted that this did not necessarily minimize their capabilities in combat. And it was above all opportunities to observe and assess the Tsar's army in battle that Lignitz was seeking.

He therefore immediately used his influence at Russian Headquarters in Ploesti to secure permission to accompany the units that were to conduct the first major operation of the war in the Balkans, the crossing of the Danube.<sup>30</sup> As a result, the

<sup>27</sup> William I to F.O, 26 May 1877. R9941. PAAA.

<sup>28</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 1, 30 May 1877. R12795. PAAA.

<sup>29</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 2, 2 June 1877. R12795. PAAA.

<sup>30</sup> Lignitz, *Aus drei Kriegen* (see n. 2), 104. A detailed history of the events of the war can be found in: Anton Springer, *Der russisch-türkische Krieg, 1877–1878 in Europa: Mit Hilfe der besten authentischen Quellen*, 7 vols. (Vienna, 1891–1893).



German military ›observer‹ not only advanced with the vanguard of the Russian invasion forces, but he was actually in one of the first assault boats that shot across the Danube.<sup>31</sup> He also took an active part in the operation by giving directions to the first groups of Russian troops as they landed on the Turkish-held side of the river. He seems to have stepped in to fill a leadership void as he noted already at this early stage some major problems in command and control<sup>32</sup>:

Bei dem Übergange am 27. [Juni] vermisste ich, dass in den vordersten Pontons weder ein höherer noch ein Generalstabs-Offizier war [...] Die jungen Offiziere, welche mit den Schützen-Kompanien des Wollhynischen Regiments ankamen, waren anfangs ratlos. Überhaupt habe ich sowohl in den ersten Momenten des Gefechtes als auch später bei den Leuten verhältnismäßig mehr Initiative als bei den Offizieren gefunden. – Während zu Anfang viel Zeit damit verloren wurde, aus dem gelandeten Menschen-Wirrwarr die taktischen Körper herauszuschälen, war später, als Zeit und Umstände dazu aufforderten, nicht das Bestreben zu erkennen, die taktische Ordnung herzustellen. Eine Feuerleitung, wie wir sie verlangen, fand nicht statt, aber viel unnützes Schiessen auf weite Entfernung. Die Terrainbenutzung war auf Seite der Türken viel besser, wie auch die Verluste derselben jedenfalls sehr viel geringer gewesen sind.

However, in general, he praised the successful operation as ›epochal‹ in its importance and reported favourably about the fighting abilities of the Russian soldier. Lignitz's behaviour in this first engagement also set the tone for his involvement throughout the war. He had taken the request to ›participate‹ in the fighting quite literally and continued to seek a place in the forefront of battle and behaved more like a Russian officer than as a neutral spectator.

It was a combination of this apparent enthusiasm for the Russian cause and camaraderie with the troops that quickly made Lignitz a celebrity following the next major action in which he involved himself. After the crossing of the Danube, he once again took steps to ensure that he remained in the crucible of the battle. He therefore arranged to accompany the flying column assembled under General Gurko that moved rapidly in front of the rest of the Army of the Danube. With the assistance of Bulgarian peasants and brigands, Gurko's troops forced a passage of the Balkans through the Shipka Pass and caught the Turks off-guard by pushing into the plain below. This rapid advance seemed to justify Russian confidence that the Turks could be easily defeated in a brief and decisive campaign. Lignitz was equally bold as he once again distinguished himself in these early engagements by moving forward with the leading units, giving direction to troops and providing the advice of an experienced combat officer to his inexperienced Russian colleagues. Although he did not provide the specific details about his direct involvement in combat in his official reports, it could not long remain a secret. His reputation amongst the Russian troops was growing too rapidly. Soldiers began to refer to him simply as ›*nash Prussak*‹ (›our Prussian‹) and ›*nash prusski Major*‹ (›our Prussian Major‹). By August 1877 a Russian commander informed him that he had become ›legendary‹ in the Russian army.<sup>33</sup> In view of the highly visible and prom-

<sup>31</sup> Diary entry, 30 June 1877, in Lignitz, *Aus drei Kriegen* (see n. 2), 110; Report by Lignitz, no. 7, 28 June 1877. R12797. PAAA.

<sup>32</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 8, 1 July 1877. Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Diary entry, 15 August 1877, in Lignitz, *Aus drei Kriegen* (see n. 2), 148.

inent nature of his activities, his contributions to the Russian war effort soon became public knowledge.

Emperor Alexander II was particularly pleased by the exploits of »his Prussian Major« during the campaign and quickly proceeded to decorate Lignitz for his bravery in the face of enemy fire.<sup>34</sup> The German military attaché was initially awarded the Order of Vladimir with Swords and a few weeks later, as the result of a warm recommendation from General Gurko, he was given the cross of St. George in recognition of the services he had performed to assist his Russian fellow officers. It was of course noted even by his German superior that this was a highly unusual distinction for a nominally neutral observer, but no objections were raised in Berlin by either the Kaiser or Bismarck. On the contrary, the Tsar seems to have prompted Werder to recommend Lignitz for a Prussian decoration. The German Emperor was likely flattered by the Tsar's gesture of recognition for the support given by Lignitz to the troops of his nephew and quickly complied with the Russian request by awarding Lignitz the coveted *Pour le Mérite*.<sup>35</sup>

This shower of military honours was accompanied by considerable publicity in the press. Most notably, Lignitz was featured in an article written by the war correspondent for the Russian daily *Novoe Vremya* (*New Times*).<sup>36</sup> The author recounted in glowing terms all of the battlefield exploits of this Prussian officer and praised the manner in which he had supported Russia both on and off the battlefield. Lignitz was portrayed, quite accurately, as a man who had rapidly made a name for himself in the Russian army amongst both the rank and file and the officers.

One of the most interesting aspects of Lignitz's sudden notoriety is Bismarck's reaction to it. He read all of the reports regarding the exploits of his attaché and was fully aware of how they were being reported in the Russian media. Yet there is no evidence that he took any action to alter Lignitz's decidedly un-neutral behaviour. The Chancellor's inaction is all the more noteworthy as he had responded quite differently when newspapers in Russia published similar articles speaking favourably of the allegedly pro-Russian behaviour of the German ambassador in Constantinople. In this case, he had immediately responded unfavourably to this press coverage, suspecting that these stories had been planted as part of a deliberate Russian plot to compromise Germany in the eyes of the other neutral powers.<sup>37</sup> In the case of Lignitz, no similar action was taken. It is doubtful that Bismarck, who monitored events in the Balkans closely, was indifferent to Lignitz's exploits on the battlefield so there were likely political calculations behind his decision to take no action. The most probable explanation for this benign indifference is that Lignitz's behaviour was tolerated as part of the Chancellor's strategy of minimizing the political risk associated with his master's Russophile sympathies. By allowing this show of solidarity on the battlefield, and thereby tolerating a minor violation of German neutrality, he probably hoped that he could avoid further pressure from the Kaiser to act in favour of Berlin's traditional ally in the political realm. In this

<sup>34</sup> Werder to William I, no. 38, 1 August 1877. R12801. PAAA; Werder to William I. 13 August 1877. R12802. PAAA.

<sup>35</sup> Diary entry, 12 October 1877, in Lignitz, *Aus drei Kriegen* (see n. 2), 191 f.

<sup>36</sup> Schweinitz to Bülow, 7 September 1877. (Translation of an article from *Novoe Vremya* of 5 September 1877). R12803. PAAA.

<sup>37</sup> Bülow to Reuss, no. 305, 6 June 1877. R12794. PAAA.

regard, Lignitz was of considerable value as a means of permitting William I to feel he was fighting side-by-side with his nephew. Coincidentally it was in connection with the most public display of the impact of Lignitz's reporting from the front lines that this aspect of the Chancellor's political strategy can be most clearly illustrated.

There were many vital interests at play in the conflict between Russia and Turkey. But in the first few months of the war, public attention was captured by the frequent and shocking reports of atrocities being committed by the belligerents against each other and against the civilian population in Bulgaria. Initially, the bulk of these allegations were directed against Russian troops and so there was considerable political pressure building up against the Tsarist cause. But just as Lignitz had managed to place himself in the middle of the battlefield action, he also managed to manoeuvre himself onto centre stage in this question. From the very first engagements of the war, Lignitz had documented his observations regarding atrocities in his official reports. He noted, however, that it was primarily the Bulgarian auxiliaries fighting on the side of the Russians who were engaging in the torture and execution of Turkish wounded and prisoners of war.<sup>38</sup> But his most famous report about excessive cruelty on the battlefield involved an eye-witness account describing the horrific aftermath of a Turkish massacre of wounded Russian prisoners in the Shipka Pass.

One of the advantages of Lignitz's rather literal interpretation of his mandate »to participate in the war« was that he was not reliant upon hear-say or rumours. Since he was in the middle of the combat action, there was no need to rely on middle-men. On 18 July 1877, he was therefore amongst the first to stumble upon the grisly spectacle of an evacuated Turkish regular army camp in the Shipka Pass. He was thus able to describe the fate of the unfortunate Russian soldiers who had fallen into the hands of the Turks in rather graphic detail: »den liegen gebliebenen Toten waren zum Teil, den Verwundeten sämtlich die Köpfe abgeschnitten. Die Köpfe lagen in den Zelten zerstreut.«<sup>39</sup> Many of the cadavers showed unmistakable signs of having been tortured. During the preceding exchange of fire, he had also witnessed how the Turks had abused the flag of truce and had fired on a stretcher-bearer who was clearly wearing the Red Cross. Not only were these actions reprehensible, but they represented clear violations of the first Geneva Convention of 1861 to which both belligerents were signatories.<sup>40</sup> When he sat down to file a report on what he had seen, Lignitz doubtless fully understood the likely political consequences of the detailed eyewitness account he was writing. He was well aware of the raging public controversy over mutual allegations of war crimes and therefore knew that a third party account could potentially have a major influence on the course of that debate. A clear indication that he recognized the political importance of his despatch is that he explicitly structured his description of the engagement in such a way that the parts dealing with the Turkish atrocities and violations of the Geneva Convention were placed in distinct sections so that they could stand on their own. Presumably he took this approach in order to facil-

<sup>38</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 8, 1 July 1877. R12797. PAAA.

<sup>39</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 14 (part I), 22 July 1877. R12800. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 14 (parts II & III), 22 July 1877. R12817. PAAA.

<sup>40</sup> For background see: Angela Bennett, *The Geneva Convention: The Hidden Origins of the Red Cross*, (Sutton, 2005).

itate communicating these portions of his report to third parties and with a view to possible publication in the press.

It appears that Werder also immediately understood the political importance of this report and probably shared its contents with Alexander II before it was passed along to Berlin. In any case, the Prussian Military Plenipotentiary followed up on Lignitz's report with a request from the Tsar to William I to have its contents published in German newspapers. In asking for this step to be taken, the Russian ruler made specific reference to the criticism that Russia had been enduring over alleged atrocities committed by her troops.<sup>41</sup> Alexander II clearly wanted to use Lignitz's report to counter the growing political backlash arising over allegations of war crimes committed by his soldiers. Given the importance of the relationship with Alexander II, Bismarck had little choice but to comply with this request and to publish the report. But he also chose to distance himself somewhat from this move. He ordered that Lignitz's report be printed in the semi-official organ of the Foreign Office, the *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, instead of the official government bulletin.<sup>42</sup> This allowed him to comply with the Russian wish and at the same time to argue in conversations with the Turks that the report had appeared in a non-government organ for which he was not responsible.<sup>43</sup>

Although Lignitz's report had pushed Bismarck somewhat reluctantly towards taking sides on the war crimes issue, he soon seized this eye-witness account as an opportunity to make a highly visible gesture of support for his Russian ally and at the same time to appease his ruler who was pushing for Germany to more clearly take sides in the conflict.<sup>44</sup> The Chancellor sent a formal protest to Constantinople demanding that the Ottoman forces adhere to the terms of the Geneva Convention, citing the report of Major von Lignitz as evidence of violations.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, he directed a circular despatch to the other neutral powers with representatives in the Turkish capital requesting that they back the German *démarche*.<sup>46</sup>

The concrete results of Bismarck's very public gesture were mixed. However, it undoubtedly achieved its main political objectives. The German Emperor was elated by this strong show of Christian solidarity against the barbaric acts of Muslim hordes and the Russian public welcomed this assistance on a highly visible and emotional issue. It appears that many Russian soldiers had begun to carry poison with them into battle to avoid capture and Lignitz reported one case where an officer had shot himself to avoid falling into Turkish hands.<sup>47</sup> This incident not only underscores the political impact of Lignitz's mission, but sheds important light on the rationale for sending him. His prominent involvement in the fighting was in many ways designed to achieve the same objectives as the Chancellor's brief defense of wounded Russian prisoners of war: It placated his Russophile master and allowed him, with little or no risk, to argue in St. Petersburg that he had loyally stood by his Russian ally during the war.

<sup>41</sup> Werder to William I, no. 37, 26 July 1877. R12800. PAAA.

<sup>42</sup> Kurowsky to Bülow, 10 August 1877. R12817. PAAA; *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 11 August 1877.

<sup>43</sup> Schwenitz to Bülow, no. 240, 30 August 1877. R12818. PAAA.

<sup>44</sup> Bismarck to Bülow, tel. no. 35, 12 August 1877. R12817. PAAA. In *NFA*, 3: 208.

<sup>45</sup> Bülow to Reuss, tel. no. 132, 17 August 1877. R12818. PAAA.

<sup>46</sup> Circular Despatch, jno. 3447, 17 August 1877. R12818.

<sup>47</sup> Schwenitz to Bülow, no. 240, 30 August 1877. R12818. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 21, 28 August 1877. R12803. PAAA.

The central role of Lignitz's reports in the political arena should not, however, create the impression that his primary task during the war was of a diplomatic nature. And although he clearly identified with his fellow Russian officers and even continuously used the words ›we‹ and ›our‹ when referring to Russian forces in writing his reports, he remained focused on his basic mandate which was to gather intelligence for the General Staff about Russia's military capabilities and about new insights into the art of warfare emerging from the conflict. Consequently, the bulk of his reports contained detailed accounts of most of the major encounters of the war, often accompanied by terrain sketches and topographic maps of the battlefields. Lignitz's staff training in cartography and his own gifts as an artist allowed him to provide a very graphic representation of events. Although these lengthy descriptions of the fighting by a seasoned combat officer are today primarily of interest to students of the Russo-Turkish war, they were at that time invaluable to the German General Staff. One of the key functions of this arm of the military was to analyze the capabilities of the belligerents and to draw conclusions from the war about the changing nature of combat in order to ensure that Germany remained the continent's pre-eminent military power.

In spite of all of the meticulous accounts of individual engagements provided in his official despatches, there were a number of important recurring themes. These focus areas aligned closely with some of the main conclusions that Lignitz had drawn from his observations in the Balkans over the course of eight months of hostilities. His judgments were perhaps sometimes harsh as he repeatedly applied the high standards of the Prussian army as his measuring stick, but they were generally fair and objective. His lack of any extreme criticism may have also stemmed from a directive given by the Wilhelmstrasse to choose his words carefully in case the content of his reports became known to his hosts.<sup>48</sup>

One of the more frequent comments made by Lignitz about the operations of the Russian army was the lack of proper command and control. Based on current research, he had correctly identified a key deficiency in the Russian armed forces that was not to be corrected before the First World War.<sup>49</sup> Already during the first major Russian action, the crossing of the Danube, Lignitz was shocked by the absence of staff officers in forward positions providing leadership and direction. He also observed on other occasions that the infantry engaged the enemy without any fire control being provided by officers.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the Russian artillery had difficulty finding the proper range for engaging the enemy.<sup>51</sup> It seems that it was a common point of view amongst observers that poor leadership was a key factor in the setbacks experienced by the Tsar's forces during the war of 1877/78. Although Lignitz did not fully subscribe to this point of view, his own experiences pointed to major failings in this area.

<sup>48</sup> Bismarck certainly later explicitly admonished Lignitz in writing to exercise greater caution in the inclusion of sensitive details about the intentions of the Russian army that could be embarrassing to Germany if they became public through an indiscretion. H. Bismarck to Bülow, 31 October 1877, in *NFA*, 3: 247 f.

<sup>49</sup> On this issue in general see: John W. Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men: Russia's General Staff and the Fate of the Empire, 1898–1914* (Baltimore, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 8, 1 July 1877. R12797. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 25, 1 October 1877. R12806. PAAA.

<sup>51</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 13, 20 July 1877. R12800. PAAA.

In his official reports, the attaché looked more to problems at the tactical level to explain the relatively poor showing of Russian forces.<sup>52</sup> He pointed in the first instance to the superiority of the Peabody-Martini rifle used by the Turkish army over the Krnka and Berdan rifles with which the Tsar's troops were equipped.<sup>53</sup> This technical edge gave the Ottoman forces significant advantages both in terms of range and firepower. However, it is unlikely that he really believed that this imbalance in raw firepower was truly decisive. Lignitz had been involved in combat operations throughout the war against France where Prussian troops had faced infantry armed with a Chassepot rifle that had twice the range of the ›Needle Gun‹ and was superior in most other respects. Yet Prussia and her allies had won a decisive victory in spite of this handicap. And the reports of the German military observer make clear that the tactical issues plaguing the Russian forces were rooted more in their doctrine and training than in inferior equipment. Lignitz emphasized on a number of occasions that Russian troops had been trained to focus on the bayonet charge as the main goal of an engagement.<sup>54</sup> They were therefore reluctant to make use of their spade to dig defensive positions and thereby exposed themselves unnecessarily to casualties from Turkish shrapnel and sharpshooters. He summarized his assessment of the suitability of Russian tactics for modern warfare in the following words<sup>55</sup>:

Schon bei den Befestigungsarbeiten in der Position von Hainkioi war mir aufgefallen, dass man die Tragweite der türkischen Waffen und die Wirkung des Massenschusses auch auf weite Distanz nicht berücksichtigte, während man für die Nah-Verteidigung mit großer Sorgfalt arbeitet [...] Die Truppen hatten ihr Schanzzeug Meilen weit zurück auf den Wagen gelassen, so dass ihnen nicht die Mittel zu Gebote standen, sich mit Holz, Steinen und Erde Abris gegen das direkte und Vertikalfeuer zu schaffen.

In general, officers and soldiers had little training in using coordinated rifle fire to engage the enemy and in attacking an opponent armed with breech-loading rifles. Where flanking manoeuvres were not possible, the Russians therefore suffered high casualties. Lignitz found this lack of preparation somewhat puzzling since all of the lessons the Russians were now learning at the cost of enormous losses had been demonstrated repeatedly during the Franco-Prussian War. Not surprisingly he came to the conclusion that the German Army could learn nothing from the Russian experience in this area. In general, his assessment of the Russian infantry, which must have been of paramount interest in the offices of the General Staff in Berlin, was that it would have to make major strides before it could even stand a comparison with their German counterparts.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, he had considerable praise for the abilities of the Turkish infantry who made optimal use of terrain and their entrenching tools to create strong defensive positions.

<sup>52</sup> For general background on Russian tactical doctrine: Bruce W. Menning, *Bayonets before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861–1914* (Bloomington, IN, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 41, 15 December 1877. R12810. PAAA.

<sup>54</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 27, 6 October 1877. R12806. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 21, 28 August 1877. R12803. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 70, 5 May 1878. R12812. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 33, 2 November 1877. R12808. PAA; Report by Lignitz, 3 September 1877. R9891. PAAA.

<sup>55</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 21, 28 August 1877. R12803. PAAA.

<sup>56</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 8, 1 July 1877. R12797. PAAA.

Although he found little in Russian infantry tactics to benefit the German Army, Lignitz was very anxious to learn and report as much as he could about any military innovations or developments that might. He pursued this goal through a combination of making careful observations on the front-lines and the successful cultivation of relationships with leading Russian and, after the armistice, Turkish military leaders. For example, while he accompanied Gurko's flying column he was involved in efforts to destroy Turkish railway lines and provided detailed descriptions about how this was affected.<sup>57</sup> His reports were also filled with diagrams and descriptions of various pieces of equipment that he deemed to be of interest to his superiors. But he also spent considerable time discussing any advances in the military art with the most senior Russian commanders. In particular, he became a confidante of General Eduard Todleben who had been given command of the siege of Plevna and later replaced Grand Duke Nicholas as supreme commander. On a few occasions, Lignitz took part in orientation sessions conducted by Todleben for his staff regarding the art of fortification and his strategy for defeating Osman Pasha.<sup>58</sup> The attaché made extensive notes during these discussions and provided his superiors in Berlin with schematics of the structures described by the General. Lignitz also engaged other prominent Russian military leaders, such as General Mikhail Skobelev, in lengthy conversations about their views on what changes needed to be made in tactical doctrine as a result of the experiences gained during the war.<sup>59</sup>

The attaché's intelligence-gathering activities were not restricted to the Russian side. Even before the armistice Lignitz attempted to gain as much knowledge as he could about the Turkish experience. In this regard, Germany had a special interest in the Ottoman artillery which was armed with the new Krupp C/73 field canon that had only recently been introduced in the German Army.<sup>60</sup> With some satisfaction, he was able to report on numerous occasions that this weapon had proven itself on the battlefield.<sup>61</sup> Following the armistice, he also conducted interviews with Turkish military leaders. His main conversation partner was Mehemet Ali, a prominent Ottoman general of German birth.<sup>62</sup> Thanks to these efforts in seeking out the perspective of the other belligerent, he was able to report to the General Staff about some of the tactical innovations that the Turks had made to adapt to the demands of modern warfare.

But once again one of Lignitz's most frequent themes concerning the Russian campaign was of more political than military interest. It dealt with the changing perceptions of the Bulgarian people on the part of the ›liberating‹ forces.<sup>63</sup> The German military attaché summarized his observations as follows<sup>64</sup>:

<sup>57</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 15, 4 August 1877. R12800. PAAA.

<sup>58</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 28, 11 October 1877. R12807. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 35, 10 November 1877. R12808. PAAA.

<sup>59</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 70, 5 May 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Schmid, *Der ›Eiserne Kanzler‹ und die Generäle: Deutsche Rüstungspolitik in der Ära Bismarck (1871–1890)* (Paderborn, 2003), 54–68.

<sup>61</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 41, 15 December 1877. R12810. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 66, 21 April 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>62</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 66, 21 April 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>63</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 5, 17 June 1877. R12797. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, 12 August 1877. R12803. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 52, 5 March 1878. R12811. PAAA.

<sup>64</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 49, 20 February 1878 (attachment dated 19 February 1878). R12811. PAAA.

Das Bild, welches vor Beginn des Krieges russische Zeitungen von Bulgarien und seinen leidenden Bewohnern entwarfen, entsprach durchaus nicht dem, was die Truppen nach Maßgabe ihres Vorschreitens von der Donau fanden. Man erwartete in ein verwüstetes, ausgesogenes Land zu kommen und rechnete für dessen Befreiung auf die Unterstützung des nach Millionen zählenden geknechteten Bruderstammes [...] – Man fand nur an der Donau an wenigen Stellen Armut, im großen Ganzen eine auf vortrefflichem Boden im Wohlstande lebende Bevölkerung, weiterhin an, in und jenseits des Gebirges Reichtum und Wohlhåbigkeit, wie sie der russische Bauer bisher höchstens in den deutschen Kolonien gesehen hatte. Was musste in der Seele des Reservisten vorgehen, der im fernen Norden eine in harter Arbeit auf undankbarem Boden kümmerlich ernährte Familie zurückgelassen hatte? Er war gerufen, um Leute zu befreien, denen es materiell viel, viel besser ging und wenn er dieselben um ein Stück Brot bat, so war die jetzt in die Armee-Sprache übergegangene regelmäßige Antwort: »nema, bratuschka«, »ich habe keins, Brüderchen«.

The Russian soldiers, like their civilian counterparts, had been exposed to years of propaganda portraying the Bulgarians as an impoverished and oppressed minority in desperate need of being freed from their cruel Muslim overlords. Yet the reality they encountered after invading that country was completely different. They found a thriving and prosperous land, filled with healthy and well-educated people. In fact, the living conditions of the Bulgarians compared very favourably with those of the peasants back home in Russia. And a large percentage of the Russian soldiers were from poor rural communities. As if to add insult to injury, the comfortable Bulgarians showed themselves very reluctant to share their resources with the army of liberation. This caused further resentment amongst the troops.

Lignitz's reports made clear that this growing disillusionment was increased by the prominent role played by Bulgarians in the commission of atrocities against Turkish soldiers and civilians.<sup>65</sup> Already in the early stages of the campaign, he had noted that Bulgarian auxiliaries seemed unable to resist the temptation to take revenge on Turkish wounded and prisoners. In later reports, he also documented how members of the Bulgarian Legion would frequently join civilians in burning and looting Turkish villages, and they were often responsible for the massacre of Turkish non-combatants. During Gurko's rapid advance with a relatively small number of troops, there was – as Lignitz noted – little that the Russians could do to prevent this kind of activity that they found repulsive. And it inevitably resulted in Turkish reprisals against Bulgarian villages after the Russian advance forces had retreated. What likely created even more resentment was that the cruelties perpetrated by the Bulgarians were usually attributed to Russian soldiers so that their reputation suffered as a result.

This recurring political theme in Lignitz's reports proved to be of particular interest to Bismarck and may have played a role in the Chancellor's decision to extend his attaché's mission beyond the end of the hostilities. On a number of occasions, he took excerpts from the attaché's reports concerning the Russian army's attitude towards Bulgaria and sent them to his ambassador in Vienna for the purpose of communicating this intelligence to the Austro-Hungarian govern-

<sup>65</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 11, 7 July 1877. R12799. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 15, 25 July 1877. R12800. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, 12 August 1877. R12803. PAAA.



ment.<sup>66</sup> In sharing these observations, he was very careful to conceal – even from his diplomats – the source for this information so as not to compromise Lignitz. Undoubtedly, he hoped to use these insights to counter Austrian objections to the creation of a large Bulgarian state in the Balkans. In Vienna, the prospect of a powerful Slavic principality under Russian domination raised grave political reservations. Lignitz's observations were likely viewed as timely evidence that these concerns were largely unfounded. In this context, his reports correctly foresaw that the relationship between Bulgarians and Russians would probably not be close after the conclusion of peace. In fact, they suggested that there would likely be tensions between both states as was in fact the case in the following years.

In general, the focus of Lignitz's reporting changed at the start of 1878. With the conclusion of the armistice at the end of January, the series of »Military Reports from the Theatre of War« ceased. The military attaché continued to file reports, but the substance of his despatches changed. The emphasis had shifted from battlefield accounts to providing a chronicle of what he was able to hear and observe in Russian Headquarters. His status as a celebrity and a brother-in-arms proved to be extremely useful in fulfilling this new task as it gave Lignitz an »insider« status. He clearly enjoyed the full confidence of Russia's military leaders who spoke quite openly with him and often used him as a conduit to express their views to Berlin. In spite of his early reservations about this entire military mission, Bismarck seems to have valued the data being provided by Lignitz in his new role. As a result, when the other German military observers were recalled from the Balkans, the Foreign Office explicitly requested that the military attaché remain because of the political importance of his reporting.<sup>67</sup>

During his months in St. Stefano, Adrianople and Constantinople, one of the most important themes that Lignitz developed was the disconnect between the ambitious war aims of politicians and the public in Russia, and the more sober view of the strategic situation at headquarters. There was a growing concern amongst Russian commanders that diplomats, such as General Nikolai Ignatiev<sup>68</sup>, might trigger another war to further their own personal ambitions and that the exhausted army would not be equal to this task.<sup>69</sup> In fact, Grand Duke Nicholas seemed to be more inclined towards concluding an alliance with the Sultan than towards further dismembering his territories.<sup>70</sup> Based on his own observations, Lignitz's assessment of the combat-readiness of Russian forces aligned with the concerns raised by their commanders.<sup>71</sup> He considered Russia's strategic situation in a war with Austria and England to be extremely precarious and he put a great deal of the blame for this exposure on the political leadership.<sup>72</sup> In his opinion, the decision to insist on the annexation of Bessarabia had unnecessarily alienated Ruma-

<sup>66</sup> Bülow to Dönhoff, no. 199, 15 March 1878. R12811. PAAA; Bülow to Dönhoff, no. 211, 17 March 1878. PAAA.

<sup>67</sup> Bülow to Schweinitz, no. 210, 17 March 1878. R9941. PAAA; Bülow to Albedyll, 22 April 1878. Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Gisela Hünigen, *Nikolaj Pavlovič Ignat'ev und die russische Balkanpolitik 1875–1878* (Göttingen, 1968).

<sup>69</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 62, 6 April 1878. R12811. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 63, 10 April 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>70</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 49, 9 March 1878. R12811. PAAA; Report by Lignitz, no. 59, 25 March 1878. R12811. PAAA.

<sup>71</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 58, 24 March 1878. R12811. PAAA.

<sup>72</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 64, 15 April 1878. R12812. PAAA.

nia and thereby endangered the army's strategic lines of communication. He also argued that Russian diplomats had missed a golden opportunity to come to a political arrangement with Turkey to pull her away from England.

It was also perhaps due to this awareness of their precarious military situation that Russian commanders went out of their way in conversations with Lignitz to cultivate close ties with Germany. In fact, it almost appeared that they wanted to enlist Bismarck's assistance in resisting the demands of civilian chauvinists in St. Petersburg. Lignitz could in any case report that he found a large number of commanders who backed the Chancellor's efforts to push for a moderation of Russian demands with respect to the borders for an enlarged Bulgaria.<sup>73</sup> Of course, the prevailing contempt for the Bulgarians amongst Russia's leading soldiers was also certainly a factor in this desire to see the new state reduced in size. Lignitz was also able to convey expressions of gratitude on the part of Russian military leaders for all the support Germany had provided during the conflict – of which Lignitz's mission constituted a major component. However, these kinds of political discussions occasionally put the military attaché in a very difficult position. For example, when the threat of Anglo-Austrian armed intervention became acute, Grand Duke Nicholas asked Lignitz point blank if Germany would mobilize any troops on her southern border in the event that Austria was to enter the war against Russia.<sup>74</sup> The military attaché diplomatically countered that he had no instructions regarding this question, but added with equal frankness that he considered any German troop movements against Austria to be highly unlikely.

As the start of the Congress of Berlin<sup>75</sup> on 14 June 1878 drew nearer and the likelihood of a wider European war grew more remote, Bismarck became increasingly concerned that indiscretions involving the contents of Lignitz's often politically sensitive reports might disrupt his delicate negotiations with the other Great Powers. The attaché was therefore at first instructed to exercise greater caution in what he put in his reports.<sup>76</sup> Soon after this warning was sent, a request was made by the Wilhelmstrasse to the Military Cabinet to issue orders for him to return to his post in Russia. This request was quickly granted.<sup>77</sup> The news of Lignitz's pending departure was not received well by Russia's military leaders. The German ambassador in Constantinople, Heinrich VII Prince Reuss, reported that Lignitz's sudden recall was greatly regretted by all of the officers at Russian Headquarters. Reuss also noted that the attaché had succeeded over the course of his difficult mission in maintaining strong sympathies for Germany within the Russian army through his actions and words. On 1 July 1878, Lignitz arrived back in St. Petersburg after a thirteen month absence and he resumed his normal duties as military attaché.

There is no question that, from a personal perspective, Lignitz's military mission in the Balkans was a huge boost to his career. Bismarck valued his reports and even the staff of the Foreign Office acknowledged the quality and importance of

<sup>73</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 63, 10 April 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>74</sup> Report by Lignitz, no. 56, 17 March 1878. R12811. PAAA.

<sup>75</sup> Ralph Melville, Hans-Jürgen Schröder, eds., *Der Berliner Kongress von 1878: Die Politik der Großmächte und die Probleme der Modernisierung in Südosteuropa in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 1982).

<sup>76</sup> Bülow to Reuss, tel. no. 73, 9 June 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>77</sup> Bülow to Albedyll, 14 June 1878. R9941. PAAA; Albedyll to Bülow, 15 June 1878. Ibid.

Lignitz's account of the war.<sup>78</sup> For his future prospects as an officer it was perhaps of even greater importance that William I was one of his most devoted readers. As a Russian partisan and a professional soldier he was anxious to learn all he could about the course of the war. Lignitz's closeness to the action put him in an ideal position to satisfy his ruler's hunger for military details on the campaign. The Kaiser would occasionally also record his praise for his military attaché's strategic insights through marginalia on the reports.<sup>79</sup> Crown Prince Frederick William was also impressed by the substance of these despatches.<sup>80</sup>

One concrete manifestation of Lignitz's new prominence was that in August 1878 he was summoned by the Emperor to visit with him for a few days while he took the waters in Gastein.<sup>81</sup> During this visit Major von Lignitz was given the particular distinction of being received by Bismarck and the two men discussed the issues surrounding war and peace in the Balkans. However, his heightened self-confidence and these closer ties to the Wilhelmstrasse appear to have had a negative impact on his working relationship with his immediate superior in St. Petersburg. General von Schweinitz found Lignitz to be something of a challenge in the following years. The German ambassador complained that his attaché too often played the role of strategist when writing his reports and he often had to preface these sometimes politically explosive memoranda written by his military attaché with his own more balanced perspective.<sup>82</sup> But these periodic tensions with Schweinitz did not prevent Lignitz from retaining his post for nine years. The German Ambassador finally convinced Bismarck that Lignitz's military career was being negatively impacted by his prolonged stay in St. Petersburg.<sup>83</sup> The Chancellor reluctantly agreed to recall Lignitz in 1885 when he returned to active service. His achievements during almost a decade on the Neva and his ambitious nature ensured that soon after his return to Germany he attained one of the most sought-after positions in the Prussian army when he was given command of the elite III (Brandenburg) Corps.

Although most evidence of Lignitz's considerable contributions to the Prussian army have been lost to the flames along with the rest of the *Heeresarchiv*, his official account of his mission during the Russo-Turkish War has been almost entirely preserved for posterity through an interesting combination of accident and design. And it is somewhat ironic that it was the complex relationship between the political and military leadership in Imperial Germany that led to this windfall for contemporary researchers. Had these despatches followed the normal workflow, almost all of them would have been sent to the General Staff and been destroyed in 1945. However, Bismarck resisted demands made by the military authorities to have Lignitz's papers turned over to them. At the request of the Kaiser, all the despatches received from Lignitz were marked as ›secret‹ and retained in the archives of the Foreign Office for security reasons.<sup>84</sup> The retention of these reports was the

<sup>78</sup> Brauer/Rogge, *Im Dienste Bismarcks* (see n. 12), 53 f.

<sup>79</sup> Report by Lignitz (Marginal note by William I), no. 64, 15 April 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>80</sup> Report by Lignitz (Marginal note by Frederick William), no. 78, 11 June 1878. R12812. PAAA.

<sup>81</sup> Diary entries, 17 & 28 August 1878, in Lignitz, *Aus drei Kriegen* (see n. 2), 299–302.

<sup>82</sup> Brauer/Rogge, *Im Dienste Bismarcks* (see n. 12), 53.

<sup>83</sup> Diary entry, 28 October 1884, Schweinitz, *Denkwürdigkeiten* (see n. 9), 2: 290.

<sup>84</sup> H. Bismarck to Bülow, 31 October 1877, in *NFA*, 3: 247 f.; Albedyll to Bülow, 7 January 1878. R12810. PAAA; Bülow to Albedyll, 21 January 1878. *Ibid.*

result of Bismarck's concern that their contents might leak out and cause some embarrassment to Russia. By restricting the distribution as much as possible, the Chancellor no doubt hoped to be able to better manage this risk. It is worth noting that the communications from the other three Prussian military observers – Werder, Villaume and Wedel – were not treated in this fashion. They followed the normal paper trail. As a result, most of these documents have been lost. It was probably the intention of the Chancellor to release Lignitz's original reports to the military authorities as soon as they were no longer politically dangerous, but this never took place. For this circumstance, researchers today can be grateful since it has meant that an almost complete record of an important mission has been preserved that is of great value for both the political and military history of the Russo-Turkish War of 1877/78.

Lignitz's mission is, however, much more significant than the detailed reports and sketches he left behind of the war in the Balkans. In many ways it documents an interesting period of transition. The assignment of Lignitz in 1876 to the German embassy in St. Petersburg was in itself part of an on-going trend towards greater professionalism and formality in the role of the military attaché. The increasing complexity and scope of modern warfare required dedicated experts in order to be able to effectively monitor and assess new developments in the armed forces of foreign countries. Yet at the same time, Lignitz's actions during his military mission in the Balkans clearly illustrate that this transition was not yet complete. In later decades, it is hard to imagine a high-ranking and nominally neutral German military attaché taking such an active part in combat and maneuvering himself on his own initiative into the forefront of the battle. At the same time this mission also documented a transition phase in Russo-German relations. Lignitz's presence in Russian headquarters was in many ways a throwback to the Wars of Liberation in 1813 when dynastic ties and shared glory on the battlefield were sufficient to bind two great powers together. And it was not only Bismarck's cold-blooded *Realpolitik*-driven resistance to symbolically recreating this soldierly bond between Russia and Prussia that showed it had quickly become an anachronism. During his stay at Russian headquarters Lignitz himself witnessed the frustration of his comrades in the face of the forces of nationalism and Slavic-Orthodox chauvinism on the home front. In this emerging new Europe, Lignitz's successful efforts to create stronger bonds between both armies were insignificant next to the bitter disappointment and increasing tensions at a national/populist level that would follow the Congress of Berlin.<sup>85</sup> Finally, Bismarck's handling of the military mission provides an interesting example of the reality of the relationship between civilian and military leaders in the Kaiserreich. During this era, the interaction was much more complex and nuanced than the simple label of 'militarism' would lead us to believe. Certainly, there is ample evidence during this episode of the chancellor's fear that overzealous and ambitious officers – such as Lignitz – would undermine his diplomatic machinations. Yet at the same time, Bismarck not only saw the political value of allowing this mission to proceed, but during its course repeatedly made use of his military attaché to support his political agenda and in fact extended the duration of the mission for political reasons. In this respect, both men came to a *modus vivendi* that benefited both sides and served the interests of the

<sup>85</sup> Irene Grüning, *Die russische öffentliche Meinung und ihre Stellung zu den Großmächten 1878–1894* (Berlin, 1929), 63–79.

German Empire.<sup>86</sup> Tragically, this tension-filled, yet often mutually beneficial working relationship based upon clear civilian leadership was not always maintained by Bismarck's successors.

## Abstract

There continues to be a dearth of detailed studies of the reports filed by military attachés. This gap is especially evident in the recent historiography of the Prussian army because the majority of these documents were destroyed along with the Heeresarchiv in 1945. However, through a series of fortunate circumstances virtually all of the original reports filed by Major Viktor von Lignitz (military attaché in St. Petersburg 1876–1885) while acting as an observer with the Russian army during the war against Turkey were retained in the archives of the Auswärtiges Amt and were thereby spared the flames. The preservation of over eighty official despatches filed during Lignitz's military mission not only provides researchers with the critical perspective of an experienced combat officer on the Balkan campaign of 1877/78, but also sheds important new light on a critical period in international affairs. In particular, the picture of Lignitz's mission that emerges from the files of the Foreign Office archives adds another chapter to the history of the problematic relationship between the civilian and military leadership during the imperial era.

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Es besteht weiterhin ein Mangel an detaillierten Studien der Berichterstattung von Militärattachés. Diese Lücke ist besonders erkennbar in der neueren Geschichtsschreibung über die preußische Armee, weil die meisten dieser Akten durch die Zerstörung des Heeresarchivs im Jahre 1945 verloren gegangen sind. Durch eine Reihe von glücklichen Umständen wurden aber alle Original-Berichte von Major Viktor von Lignitz (Militär-Attaché in St. Petersburg 1876–1885) als Beobachter mit der russischen Armee während des Krieges gegen die Türkei vom Auswärtigen Amte in dessen Politischem Archiv zurückbehalten und entkamen dadurch den Flammen. Die Erhaltung von über 80 offiziellen Depeschen, die Lignitz während seiner Militärmission eingereicht hat, gewähren Forschern nicht nur eine kritische Perspektive auf den Balkan-Feldzug 1877/78 seitens eines kampferprobten preußischen Offiziers, sondern sie wirft auch ein neues Licht auf eine kritische Periode in den internationalen Beziehungen. Insbesondere liefert das Bild der Lignitz-Mission, das sich aus den Akten des Politischen Archivs ergibt, ein neues Kapitel in der Geschichte des problematischen Verhältnisses zwischen der zivilen und militärischen Führung während der Kaiserzeit.

<sup>86</sup> This finding aligns with the main thesis put forward in Schmid, *Der ›Eiserne Kanzler‹ und die Generäle* (see n. 60).

