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A Bavarian Prince and a Soldier of Germany

Holger Afflerbach, Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern im Ersten Weltkrieg

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With over 450 articles from which to choose, this selection for analysis may seem puzzling. The author is among Germany's leading scholars of the nature and history of war. The essay is typical of his work: comprehensively researched and well presented. But the content is at first impression *Hausmannskost*, »good plain cooking«. It is biographically focused at a time when collective analysis dominates. Its subject is male, Caucasian, and a royal prince, when scholars assiduously seek the female, the outsider, the voiceless as foci of research. The essay emphasizes strategy and policy, military operations at Imperial Germany's highest levels. The piece concentrates on operations considered at the highest levels, eschewing as opposed to discussing the common soldiers' experiences. And these perspectives are offered at a time when the study of war-making emphasizes its byways and penumbras: battlefield archaeology, spaces and landscapes.

Is »Kronprinz Rupprecht« therefore best approached as a form of artifact? Is it a period piece, evoking a time in the study of war before social, economic, cultural themes complicated a straightforward presentation of battles and sieges? Considered in broad professional context, this work instead is firmly embedded in the historical discipline's cutting edge: The notion of history as a process of »long duration« has recently been challenged by the perspective of history as contingency. This approach emphasizes the continuous synergy of a spectrum of factors: the whens, hows, and whys events happened as they did. It invites, overtly or by the notion of history as a process of »long duration« has recently been comprehensively challenged by the perspective of history as contingency. This approach emphasizes the continuous synergy of a spectrum of factors

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generating alternative possibilities. Its emphasis is on forks in the road, situations generating legitimate questions over which way events would develop.

As a corollary of this trope, »contingent history« depends heavily on individuals-individuals positioned at crucial places and in crucial times, but who were also shaped by their heritage and experience.

And here is where Afflerbach's essay encourages general reflection. Its central figure stood at a fulcrum of history, perceived the situation's contingent elements – and both as crown prince and army group commander, failed to act effectively on convincing first-hand evidence that the decision-makers responsible for strategy and politics were bringing the German Empire to ruin. Jonathan Boff of the University of Birmingham, completing a monograph on the Prince, describes Rupprecht a bit hyperbolically as one of history's most tragic figures. Afflerbach's Prince Rupprecht is less Homeric. He is an intersectional figure: simultaneously at the capstones of two defining experiences of modern Germany: Michael Stürmer's »Das ruhelose Reich«, the »Restless Empire«, and the Great War that ended it. Yet he remains on the peripheries of both milieus, a marginal attendant lord who swells progresses, starts scenes, yet is relegated to marginal references in the contexts alike of the German Empire and the Great War.

Is Rupprecht's status best understood as predictable or paradoxical? He was heir to the throne of a state second only to Prussia in size and influence in the Second Reich's empire's federated structure. He was correspondingly deeply involved in the ongoing tensions between centralization and federalism arising from Germany's incompletely defined structure. And the federal sympathies he articulated before the war were by no means abstractions. In particular Rupprecht was concerned with preserving Bavaria's localized autonomy, the autonomy that specifically defined the Bavarian army as a separate contingent with its own autonomous rights. During the war he made it no secret that he would prefer commanding a Bavarian army than being promoted to an army group. That position reflected the heightened structural tensions between Prussian and non-Prussian contingents of an army that was constitutionally federal in structure but grew increasingly centralized under the stresses of a drawn-out war fought with inadequate resources. In particular Bavarians increasingly saw themselves as discriminated against in everything except dangerous front line assignments. The accuracy of that belief was less relevant than a perception strong enough that by 1918 Allied intelligence regularly described the morale of Bavarian divisions as good, but strongly anti-Prussian.

If »Saupreuss« was increasingly becoming a single word among Bavarians during the war, how far did the malaise reach beyond the trenches? Even more to the point, might wartime alienation at high military levels have at least seasoned Bavarian political policies and social attitudes during the Weimar years? Rupp-

recht's post-war career suggests otherwise. He supported a Bavarian constitutional monarchy but only in principle. His opposition to the Weimar Republic remained equally theoretical. His distance from the Third Reich brought him exile in Italy and his family into concentration camps. After World War II Rupprecht continued to advocate the restoration of Bavaria's monarchy, but in fact evolved-or devolved-into a kind of grandfather figure who, when he died in 1955, received an anticlimactic state funeral.

Afflerbach's essay implies Rupprecht's behavior after 1918 was defined by neither his German nor his Bavarian self-identification. Instead that identity was occupational; Rupprecht in the final analysis was a professional soldier. Anything but a uniformed dilettante on the Habsburg model, the Prince took his military career seriously from its inception – both for its own intrinsic value and as the best way for a Bavarian ruler to stand out in a Prussian-dominated Reich. He was from the Great War's beginning a central figure at the army's highest levels, whose influence and importance were primarily contingent as on his performance as a commander.

In that context Afflerbach's presentation highlights the often-misunderstood nature of the Second Reich's high command system. The familiar image is of elderly excellencies or princely scions as epauletted figureheads whose professional chiefs of staff did the real thinking and made the important decisions. The actual concept was developed as a synergistic, even symbiotic relationship between men of different abilities: one a field soldier with social status and political skill (and at least since the French Revolution a non-political senior officer has been a contradiction in terms); and on the other a master of military theory and war's nuts and bolts. The anticipated result was often described as resembling the kind of brokered marriage still the norm in Germany's higher social circles: companionship developing into affection. Pairings were made with much the same careful thought employed in marital matchmaking.

When the commander was from a royal house, however, the Chief of Staff was likely to be more mentor than partner. This was not the case with Rupprecht. His first chief of staff, Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, since 1912 chief of staff of the Bavarian army, was widely and legitimately recognized as the pick of Bavaria's military stable. But Rupprecht was a graduate of Bavaria's war academy and himself a qualified general staff officer. As a troop commander he had earned recent, solid respect when in charge of a division, then a corps. And at forty-five he was a mature adult who knew himself well enough to discover his limitations-eventually if not immediately.

In the war's first weeks Rupprecht lobbied forcefully for a larger role assigned to the largely Bavarian 6th Army he commanded than the general war plan allowed. When a revised strategy was not immediately forthcoming the Prince

went forward on his own initiative, as a matter of honor as much as operations. 6th Army mounted a series of attacks that began with bayonets fixed, bands playing and colors unfurled, then stalled in a maze of trenches and recoiled under French counterattacks even as Krafft and Rupprecht agreed on continuing the offensive. Of the 300 000 men who went to war under Bavaria's blue and white colors, over 80 000 became casualties in the war's first six weeks – nearly 25 per cent. In the infantry regiments the casualty figure was around 60 per cent.

The implications of the butcher's bill did not sink in at once. Afflerbach depicts Rupprecht in the war's first months as focusing more closely on the shortcomings of Chief of Staff Helmuth von Moltke the Younger than on his own errors of commission and omission as an army commander. During 1915 the Bavarian Crown Prince continued to believe Germany could win its war at the tactical/operational level on the Western Front. He clashed bitterly and fundamentally with Moltke's replacement Erich von Falkenhayn because of what Rupprecht considered the latter's unwillingness to risk much to win all in the purportedly decisive theater. Elevation to army group command in August 1916, and the accompanying confrontation with the Anglo-French offensive on the Somme, began expanding the Prince's perspective.

Since Krafft was reassigned in May 1915, Rupprecht's command decisions were essentially his own. His staff officers functioned less on the German model and more on the French and American one, as subordinate advisors.

Hard, direct experience helped the Prince to a reluctant conclusion. Allied material superiority was a permanent given that would eventually erode the Central Powers' war-making capacity should the conflict continue in its existing parameters. Increasing confidence informed Rupprecht's first major policy-level contribution to an increasingly tense debate on Germany's war effort and war aims. It was fundamental: a criticism in particular of the U-boat campaign that brought America into the conflict, and in general of the rush to total war – that was instituted by the command team of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff that replaced Falkenhayn in August 1916.

Rupprecht's »one big idea« that total war meant eventual disaster for Germany was sufficiently accurate that Afflerbach credits the Prince Rupprecht with a more firmly based, more realistic strategic insight than those he vainly sought to persuade: Hindenburg and Ludendorff, successive chancellors Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and Georg von Hertling, Kaiser Wilhelm, even his own father Ludwig III of Bavaria. The insight, however, remained single-issue, aphoristic, and ultimately unpersuasive.

Rupprecht's failure to develop and present a comprehensive strategic alternative in good part reflected the alternate focus, the operational strains and demands, of his own new command. These in turn brought their own caveats. The

protracted fighting on the Somme and in Flanders during 1917 provided a hands-on awareness of Germany's continually increasing material inferiority. That same growing imbalance of force kept Rupprecht aware of the penumbral costs of the defensive strategy Ludendorff adopted in 1917. In particular the construction and occupation of the defensive system called the Siegfried Line made operational sense. But the accompanying systematic, comprehensive devastation and depopulation was a fundamental difference between »hard war« as practiced in the trenches and total war as implied by the all too appropriately named Operation Alberich. Rupprecht did not want his name associated with a policy that was a major challenge to negotiations of the depth and nature that the Prince increasingly considered a necessary addition to German national strategy.

The Prince's negative evaluation of Germany's military prospects was further enhanced in 1917, when his army group bore the brunt of that year's British-spearheaded Allied offensives. The fundamental responsibility of army group command at that stage of the war was managerial: committing reserves at the right times and places in appropriate numbers, maintaining logistics systems inevitably stretched to their limits by enemy action, not least securing a fair share, and a bit more, of increasingly scarce resources in competition with other senior commands. Rupprecht as well kept in constant touch with the desperate, closely gripped fighting that kept the German front intact—just barely intact—under successive massive hammer blows. Viscerally as well as intellectually he expanded his perspective on the objective consequences of an increasing imbalance of forces and the correspondingly enhanced erosion of Germany's resources, human and material.

Rupprecht argued that any relative superiority gained by the collapse of Russia was a short-term phenomenon whose long-term prospects, however extensive, were likely to be too late for the Second Reich. The Prince favored using the Russian spoils as leverage in a diplomatic campaign focused on securing a negotiated peace. His position was predictably swamped, both in military and political circles, by Erich Ludendorff's alternative of an all-out attack on the Western Front, into the teeth of the Allied armies, that would impel peace on German terms.

From the beginning Rupprecht was not merely skeptical, but openly critical of Ludendorff's advocacy of seeking a decisive strategic/operational victory. He drew the same basic conclusion as Ludendorff: Germany was rapidly reaching the end of its deployable resources. But that was an imperative for concluding peace. Germany, Rupprecht insisted, was running out of time in both operational and diplomatic contexts. That made Ludendorff's projected offensive an all or nothing option. Anything short of a decisive victory was a harbinger of disaster. But cutting edge experience had convinced the Prince that the nature of the Great War

made military victory of any kind, on any level, an incremental process. Since 1915, commanding first an army then an army group, Rupprecht had thwarted Allied efforts to breach the front in his sectors. It was correspondingly logical that given their superiority in men and guns, their strategic and operational mobility, the French and British – and the Americans arriving in rapidly increasing numbers – would have even better odds of eventually containing a German effort, no matter how carefully planned, skillfully implemented, and courageously fought.

Va banque might have its uses and appeal at the gaming table. In modern war it was a *fata morgana*: a mirage nourishing an illusion. But as preparations for the grand offensive got under way at the turn of the year, as that offensive increasingly became the sole focus of Germany's national strategy, Rupprecht faced a quandary. He noted comprehensive German shortages in men and material almost casually accepted as a given, to be compensated for by superior fighting power. He noted as well Ludendorff's unbending insistence on a tactical focus: attacking, breaking through, and only then deciding on the next steps. Yet the Prince's staff was intimately involved in structuring the details of Ludendorff's plan. His army group was a key element in executing the plan. And as the plan developed, Rupprecht's perspective increasingly focused downward and inward. Focusing on the mission of his army group as opposed to any broader, more forceful input on the levels of strategy and policy. As an alternative to Ludendorff's tactical emphasis, he advocated creating an operational-level *Schwerpunkt*: a single – thrust attack against the British – with his army group playing the major role. It was at least as reasonable a plan as Ludendorff's more diffused project. Predictably the recommendation went nowhere. Predictably as well, Rupprecht metaphorically saluted and followed the time-honored maxim of »shut your mouth and do your duty«.

Within a week of the offensive's launching the Crown Prince was confiding to his diary that the war was lost: doomed, as he had predicted, by a series of increasingly random sector attacks that led nowhere in particular. By November Rupprecht, like many of the men under his orders, was focusing more on rebuilding his personal life than on mitigating the wider consequences of imminent defeat. But he held his army group together to the bitter end. Never was it said that Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria ever failed in his duty as a soldier.

Afflerbach describes Rupprecht in two contexts. He invites consideration as something close to a world-historical figure in the sense of Hegel or Carlyle: someone at the fulcrum of great events, with the position, the power and the ability to make a difference. As a prince and a general Rupprecht stood *de facto* far up in the hierarchy of a militarized empire. He also stood in almost constant opposition to Germany's responsible decision-makers, for reasons Afflerbach

shows made solid sense to the point of being commonsensical. More specifically, Rupprecht had the makings of a *prince connétable*. Arguably the best of Germany's army group commanders on the Western Front, correspondingly respected for his competence, might have developed into a royal war leader in the pattern of such early modern predecessors as Prince Eugene or the *Türkenlouis* Markgraf Ludwig Wilhelm von Baden-Baden: an anachronism to be sure, but potentially the right anachronism at the right time.

Instead the Prince stood at a fulcrum of history, perceived the situation's contingent elements – and failed to act consequently. Is this behavior best interpreted in personal terms: »choosing not to« like Herman Melville's Bartleby the Scrivener? Did it reflect a situation whose inherent complexity inhibited translating perception into action, like the proverbial donkey who starved because he was unable to decide from which full manger to eat? Contingencies – and yet this article also invites reconsideration of the Second Reich, a structure that might not have been as fragile as currently accepted; a mentality that might have been less »restless« than current perspectives concede. In the final analysis Rupprecht was a Bavarian prince, and a soldier of Germany. He saw neither fundamental contradiction nor objective catastrophe in balancing the two positions.

These are the kind of reflections that any article in any issue of »Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift« can encourage. The journal stands as a monument to its editorial staff, its reviewers and contributors – and to the community of military historians who in the past half-century have established a flourishing branch of scholarship under what often have been less than encouraging circumstances. I am honored to stand in such company.