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LEHMANN'S SCHARNHORST.*

By SPENSER WILKINSON.

IN the great drama of the revolutionary and Napoleonic age no episode is more striking, none richer in lessons for our own time, than that of the downfall and the uplifting of Prussia. How was it possible that the Monarchy which had been left in 1786 one of the great Powers of Europe, could in 1806 be utterly crushed in seven weeks? How was it possible again that after six years more, during which Prussia was stripped of half her territories, and half of the rest kept under the iron heel of the conqueror, she could suddenly re-appear as a great Power and put into the field an army as large as that of her Russian allies, and far more efficient than the one she had lost?

The resurrection of Prussia was the work of a group of men, among whom the chief figures are Stein and Scharnhorst, and the life of Scharnhorst is, therefore, necessarily the history of the new creation of the Prussian Army, as the life of Stein is the history of the new foundation of the Prussian State. But to understand how Prussia rose again, it is necessary to understand first how she fell. Sir John Seeley, in his "Life and Times of Stein," has admirably told the whole story in outline, though if we may judge by the biographies of Seeley which appeared in the newspapers at the time of his lamented death, the British reading public has not yet discovered this the most valuable of all his works. Seeley, however, had only imperfect access to the materials for the military history of Prussia, and the purpose of this paper is to draw the attention of the readers of the *JOURNAL* to the rich store of information contained in Lehmann's more recent volumes on Scharnhorst.

In the sketch of Scharnhorst written by his intimate friend Clausewitz and published in 1832, we are told that if it is always difficult precisely to estimate the activity of a statesman, the difficulty is increased in the case of a man who, like Scharnhorst in the midst of his exertions, kept himself as far as possible out of sight in the background. For this reason Clausewitz found it impracticable to trace by documentary evidence his friend's share in the great events of his time. The hard task which Clausewitz renounced has been performed by Max Lehmann, who has ransacked the literature of the period and the archives of the Prussian War Office to find all that bears upon Scharnhorst's career, and has told the story with a fulness and a sympathy that leave little to be desired, and written with a force and freshness that make his book a credit to German literature.

Lehmann is a disciple of Treitschke's, that is to say, he writes history to glorify Prussia. The partiality of patriotism appears on every page. When a German does a kindly act it is because he is a "kind-hearted German," when a Frenchman or an Englishman does wrong it is because he is French or English; "German" being synonymous with "virtuous,"

* "Scharnhorst." Von Max Lehmann. Leipzig, 1886-7.

and "foreigner" with "vicious." An Englishman may derive a salutary warning from this naïve distribution of adjectives, and Lehmann's bias goes little deeper. He is perfectly honest and accurate in his account of the facts.

The fall of Prussia was due, in the first instance, to the irresolution of her Government in the period between 1803 and 1806.

In the eighteenth century the King was the State, and Frederic William I., who concealed under the garb of a sordid and repulsive personality the essence of a great statesman, learned early the lesson that the State, far more than the individual, must rely on self-help. His hard, unamiable economy endowed Prussia with a force stronger than was possessed by other States of greater area and population. Frederic II., like his father, identified himself with the State, and threw his life into this work which this conception implies. He, too, grasped the fundamental law of the political world, that a State must rely upon its own efforts. Accordingly he clearly thought out his mission—the assertion of Prussia; he closely studied the forces against which he had to contend, and, never losing his grip of his one object, could look back at his death upon a career devoted to a purpose, and therefore great. He left Prussia one of the great Powers of the world.

Frederic William II. retained from the tradition of his century the belief that he was the State, but being a prey to sensual enjoyments he had no guiding purpose, and no single eye with which to see the world as it was. Accordingly he is torn between conflicting aims, looking now to Poland and now to the Rhine; and follows the lead now of one, now of another, of the small men about him, whose claim to be heard was, at the worst, that they pandered to his weakness, and at the best that they had been clerks to Frederic the Great. The chief antagonist of the Prussian purpose (to be a great Power) was Austria, and the accession of Leopold gave Austria a statesman. A few months of negotiation enabled Leopold to divert Frederic William from the Prussian policy, and to turn his attention from Vienna to Paris. Not knowing what he wanted—for though he attacked the French he was longing for a province of Poland—Frederic William invaded France with less than a quarter of his army, in conjunction with less than a fifth of the Austrian Army. The war went on after the first disaster, but as Prussia and Austria were more hostile to one another than to France and more afraid of each other than of the enemy, and as the French to resist the scraps of armies opposed to them called the nation to arms, the allies were treated to a succession of reverses. When the French had conquered the whole left bank of the Rhine, Frederic William discovered that he had really no particular quarrel with them, and by the treaty of Basle retired from the contest and consoled himself for his failure with his new Polish province. He died in 1797, and was succeeded by Frederic William III., a virtuous and intelligent young man, so afraid of deciding wrong that he never in his life decided anything. To such a disposition "a policy of neutrality" commended itself, for it was a phrase that veiled the fact that he had no policy. With the humanity of an age in which personal comfort

was the supreme object he shrank from war, but as the ruler of a great Power he expected to exercise some influence beyond his own borders. His weakness—not peculiar to himself or his time—was that he did not grasp the inconsistency between these two desires. The rights or the interests of a State if challenged must be sustained by force, and to renounce the use of force is to abandon every right and every interest that is challenged.

The concrete cases in which the choice was presented to Frederic William III. were not easy ones. The first was that of Hanover. By the treaty of Basle Prussia had undertaken to guarantee the neutrality of Hanover (although its king, George III., was still at war with France) and the cordon of troops which watched the line of demarcation between the neutral area and the theatre of war included Hanover in its protection. The cordon was withdrawn on the cessation of hostilities in 1800. But in 1803 the war between England and France began again. Prussia must either be content to see Hanover the theatre of war, in which case its conquest by the French was probable; or must occupy the country herself, at the risk of quarrel with one or both parties. Frederic William did not want the French to enter Hanover, as they would then be posted between his own dominions in Brandenburg and his territories on the Rhine. But while he hesitated the French acted. They marched an army into Hanover and occupied the country. He felt aggrieved, but he would not fight; and as this was well understood, the French drew the natural inference that Prussia did not count.

In 1805 came the coalition between England, Austria, and Russia. Frederic William would not join it, and determined to be neutral, mobilising part of his army to prevent a Russian violation of the neutrality of Silesia. But at the outset of the war Napoleon violated the neutrality of the Prussian territory of Anspach by marching an army corps through it. Thereupon the King mobilised his whole army and agreed to a treaty with Russia, binding himself to send an immediate ultimatum to Napoleon, and, failing a satisfactory answer, to join the coalition with 180,000 men. He sent Haugwitz to Napoleon, ostensibly with the ultimatum, but really, as Lehmann has discovered, with secret instructions on no account to bring about a breach. Napoleon delayed the negotiation until after the battle of Austerlitz, when Haugwitz signed the treaty of Schönbrunn, involving a Franco-Prussian alliance and the cession of Hanover by France to Prussia. This cession of course meant war between England and Prussia, and as Frederic William wanted no war he offered to ratify the treaty of Schönbrunn only on the understanding that he was not to annex Hanover, but merely to occupy it until the general peace, when perhaps he thought England would agree to its annexation. Before Napoleon had consented to this change the Prussian Army was placed on a peace footing. Then Napoleon declared the treaty void, and substituted a new one less advantageous to Prussia, but still involving the annexation of Hanover and war with England. This the King accepted. The King had thus played false with the coalition, had revealed to Napoleon his real hostility, and had then shrunk back at the critical moment. If

he had deliberately set out, first to isolate himself, and then to provoke a French attack, he could not have succeeded more perfectly.

In the summer of 1806 the continued presence of the French Army in Southern and Western Germany convinced him that he had made a mistake. The discovery that Napoleon had offered to restore Hanover to England made him afraid of being attacked by surprise, so he again mobilised his army, opened negotiations with the Tsar who had not yet made peace with France, and sent an ultimatum to Napoleon. From the extreme of timidity he had passed to the extreme of rashness. If the King expected Russian help against the French attack it was in the highest degree imprudent to precipitate that attack by an ultimatum, and thus bring on the decisive struggle before the co-operation of Russia was assured, and before the Russian Army could be brought up.

These preliminaries have been recapitulated in order to show how in the management of its policy, in the stages preliminary to the military measures proper, the King's government had laid the foundations of defeat. The military conduct of the war was such as might be expected to accompany this kind of policy. No one could reasonably doubt, after the campaigns of Austerlitz, that a war against Napoleon would be a life and death struggle. Yet the troops in the Eastern provinces, to the number of 33,000 men, were not included in the mobilisation. The essence of good management is unity of direction. The King appointed the Duke of Brunswick to be commander-in-chief of the army; then he appointed Prince Hohenlohe to command half of it, and finally took the field himself. Accordingly no order could be given without his consent; he would not consent unless convinced, and could never be convinced so long as anyone raised objections. The result was that the army was commanded by an irregular committee, with an irresolute chairman, at which a dozen persons attended and gave their opinions, and in which Hohenlohe and his staff-officer conceived their mission to be to oppose whatever the Duke of Brunswick suggested. With such a council of war, instead of a commander-in-chief, no successful war was possible. Without a policy, without a rational organisation of the command, with little more than half the actually available force in the field the Prussians were in any case sure to be beaten by Napoleon. But the extent of the disaster was increased by other causes.

Not one of the generals in the army, except perhaps Blücher, seems to have understood war. They were perfect in the drill of fifty years before, but had no conception that a battle and a pre-arranged review are two different things. Outposts and reconnaissance duties were unknown to most of the officers. Skirmishing was despised. Accordingly at every turn the troops were at a disadvantage against the French. Yet how much could have been done with them by a general like Wellington, is clear from the excellent behaviour of the men in the battles of Jena and Auerstädt. There were good officers in the army. Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, York, Bülow, and others who became famous in the later wars were company or field officers. But none of these rising men were in authority. Promotion by seniority was the rule, and the generals were

almost without exception old and incapable. The capitulations that followed within the weeks after the great defeat showed the military incompetence of the bulk of the superior officers, the brilliant exception of Blücher serving only to show more clearly what the others ought to have been.

One cause which increased the gravity of the disasters ought not to be forgotten. The idea that the defence of the country was everybody's duty did not exist. It was thought wrong for the officers in command to seize upon provisions or stores for the benefit of their men. In the retreat from Jena to Magdeburg, and from Magdeburg to Prenzlau, the troops suffered incredible privations. They passed starving through a country in which there was plenty to eat; they were not allowed to touch it, while their French pursuers had the full benefit of it. The nation might be destroyed, but private property must be respected.

When the peace came, Prussia had to be built up anew from the foundations. The great difficulty was the King, for he could no more make up his mind after than before. Ever since his accession the army had been his pet care. He had had a Royal Commission of field-marschals and generals sitting for years, but it had rejected all the pet ideas of the reformers. Now he appointed a new commission, of which the leading spirit was Scharnhorst.

When Hanover was declared neutral in 1796 it was covered by a combined cordon of Prussian and Hanoverian troops. The Prussians were under the Duke of Brunswick with his headquarters at Minden, then the residence of Stein. The Hanoverian corps was commanded by Count Walmoden, Stein's brother-in-law, whose headquarters were also at Minden. Both Stein and Brunswick made the acquaintance of Walmoden's chief staff-officer, the Hanoverian Major Scharnhorst, who had made a name by his splendid bravery in the recent campaigns, as well as by his remarkable contributions to military literature. To his cool, clear head, and stout heart it was mainly due that the Duke of York had made good his retreat from Dunkirk in 1793, and he had proposed, planned, and in great part conducted the bold exploit by which the garrison of Menin had cut their way through the besieging army in 1794. He had served in the cavalry, in the artillery, and on the staff, and had been a military instructor. The "Military Library" (1783-4), and the "New Military Journal" (from 1788 onwards) were standard periodicals, for which he was responsible, and he was the author of a "Handbook for Officers of the Applied Military Sciences," and of a "Military Pocket Book for Field Use." The Prussian headquarters after making the acquaintance of Major Scharnhorst, and seeing how he fulfilled his duties, reported to Berlin that he was an eminently practical officer, and that it would be a real acquisition if he could be induced to enter the Prussian Service. A few months later the offer was made to him of a majority in the Prussian artillery. This offer was declined. But in 1800, Scharnhorst, now Lieut-Colonel, finding that not being a nobleman he had no future in the Hanoverian Service, intimated that he was willing to accept a similar proposal. The young King Frederic William III., when Crown Prince,

had made his acquaintance and received a favourable impression, so that no difficulties were raised, and on May 1st, 1801, Licut-Colonel Scharnhorst was appointed to the 3rd Prussian Regiment of Artillery, and in the following year received his patent of nobility.

One of his first appointments was that of instructor in the professional school for officers at Berlin, which he very soon transformed into what would now be called a staff college. His lectures at this institution were the beginning of Prussian systematic instruction in staff duties, and in the theory of war. At the same time he founded the Berlin Military Society, an institution for the delivery of lectures resembling in many ways that which publishes this JOURNAL. In 1804 Scharnhorst was transferred to the staff, becoming one of three quartermasters to whom the study of three theatres of operations probable for Prussia was assigned. In 1806 he was the Duke of Brunswick's chief staff-officer, and after that general's fall at Auerstädt, attached himself during the retreat to Blücher, who attributed to him whatever success attended his efforts to save his corps. In the subsequent campaign in Prussia Scharnhorst greatly distinguished himself, especially by his management at Eylau of L'Estocq's corps, by which that battle was saved.

Scharnhorst's modesty and bravery had attracted the King, who promoted him in July, 1807, to Major-General, and placed him at the head of the new Royal Commission to re-organise the army. From that time onwards Scharnhorst's whole life was devoted to the one task of preparing Prussia to renew the struggle for her independence. In this effort he combined a Napoleonic activity with the patience of Job, and with a modesty all his own. Of the Royal Commission he was the moving spirit; but it was laborious and harassing work, for the King appointed to it as many re-actionaries as reformers. By degrees Scharnhorst persuaded him to modify its composition, so that the reformers became a majority, but he never could induce the King to adopt a single measure in its entirety, or to agree to more than a tithe of what the Commission proposed.

In June, 1808, Scharnhorst became Adjutant-General, with the duty of reporting all military matters to the King; in March, 1809, when the Ministry of War was re-organised, he became also chief of the general war department, or head of what would now be called the general staff; in 1810 he further undertook the direction of the military academy, or reformed and enlarged staff college; and he was also Inspector-General of the corps of engineers. Thus, between 1808 and 1810, almost the whole work of organising and managing the army was concentrated into his hands, and there was no department which he touched without transforming. Clausewitz has given a brief survey of Scharnhorst's aims in the re-organisation of the army. They were, he says:—

“1. A sub-division, armament and equipment corresponding to the new conditions of war.

“2. To recruit the army from a better class, and to raise its tone. Hence the abolition of the enlistment of foreigners, an approximation to

universal service, abolition of corporal punishment, and the foundation of good institutions for military education.

“3. A careful selection of the officers placed in command of the larger units. Seniority, which before had had too extensive a sway in the Prussian Army, and had given it its leaders, was restricted in its rights, and the principle set up that those should be preferred who had most recently served in war, or had in some way distinguished themselves in it. As a fact, most of the men who afterwards were the most distinguished leaders were first brought to the front under Scharnhorst's administration.

“4. New exercises suited to modern war.”

These headings, though they classify what was done, give hardly an idea of its extent. Scharnhorst induced the King to sub-divide the army into divisions of all arms, reduced to brigades when Napoleon, by the Convention of 1808, obliged Prussia not to increase her army beyond 42,000 men, and not to create new cadres. At a time when the gun-foundries at Berlin and Breslau had been destroyed by the French, Scharnhorst managed to produce guns, muskets, and powder for a much larger army than Prussia possessed, and to provide for the troops the overcoats they had lacked in 1806. His great leading idea was to interest the whole nation in the national defence, and to be able to call the whole population to arms when the time should come. The Commission over and over again proposed the formation of a great reserve, or landwehr, which was to be separate from the army, and to include, as far as possible, all the men capable of arms. But the King would have no such revolutionary scheme. The most that could be had from the King was his consent to allow trained men to be sent on furlough, and their places taken by recruits, and though only a small number of such furlough-men were permitted for each company, it was by making the most of the device that Scharnhorst produced the trained reserves that swelled the ranks in 1813. The King would neither introduce universal service, nor any kind of militia or landwehr until the enemy was at hand, that is, until too late for such measures to yield a practical result.

One of Scharnhorst's strongest convictions was that good leaders must be selected, irrespective of seniority. He and his comrades on the commission had before their eyes the example of Napoleon and his marshals, all of whom were promoted without regard to age or seniority, on account of their tried ability. Accordingly, the commission made drastic proposals, which the King would not endorse. They were, however, able to abolish the exclusion from the commissioned ranks of all but nobles, and to introduce the system by which future officers were elected by the officers of the regiments. They probably hardly foresaw the effect of this election in perpetuating in fact, though not in theory, the exclusiveness of the system. In the department of tactics, the essential change effected was that manœuvres were substituted for pre-arranged reviews, and due weight given to the working of the three arms in common. Scharnhorst himself trained up the new generation of staff officers.

It was above all a change in the spirit of the army that Scharnhorst sought to bring about, and in this he succeeded. He was the founder of a school, and when he died he left a number of disciples who represented the ideals for which he had worked. The body of Prussian officers did not cease to be a caste, but it became to some extent a caste of which the principle was duty. One thing Scharnhorst could not do. It was impossible to induce the King to have a policy. He had been thoroughly overawed in 1806, and nothing could bring him a second time to stand up against Napoleon. The whole Prussian patriotic party was for joining with Austria in 1809. Scharnhorst was ready, but the King dare not budge. In each succeeding year the patriots were eager to rise and fight. But the King only went deeper into dependence upon France. He had to dismiss Stein; to accept Scharnhorst's resignation—a mere form, for Scharnhorst without the official position continued to direct the work of the war office, and he kept his post at the staff and its college—and finally to enter the war against Russia on Napoleon's side.

In December, 1812, the Grand Army was no more, and Napoleon was on his way back to Paris. By the end of the month York had taken the Prussian contingent over to the Russian side. Prussia's opportunity had come at last. The army knew it, and the generals in command spontaneously made their arrangements to fight the French. The people knew it, and began their preparations. The statesmen knew it, and besought the King to act. But the King was still blind and deaf. He thought generals, statesmen, soldiers, and people revolutionaries; was indignant at their disregard of his heaven-sent authority, and sent to assure Napoleon of his fidelity. The question arose in many a Prussian heart whether a spiritless King was worth keeping. Alexander sent him an ultimatum. Then at last Frederic William yielded, sorely against his will, to the necessity of being on his country's side, and the treaty with Russia was signed. A month later Prussia had 150,000 men under arms, and was levying 120,000 more.

Scharnhorst now obtained the royal approval to the projects for landwehr and landsturm, and to the suspension of all exemptions from military service—but all three measures only for the duration of the war. Arms, men, leaders, and the right spirit were now all forthcoming. Scharnhorst's six years of perseverance and patience had borne fruit. Only one man had learned nothing. The army had been raised, armed, organised, and trained under Scharnhorst's auspices; it remained to put him in command of it. Frederic William never seems to have thought of such a step for a moment; he accepted Scharnhorst's modest proposal that Blücher should command, and allowed the first soldier in his dominions to be merely Blücher's chief of the staff—a position in which he had little more influence on the course of the war than when he had been seven years before chief of the staff to the Duke of Brunswick.

In the first great battle Scharnhorst was wounded. Frederic William let him go off, with his wound, on a mission to Vienna. On the journey, which was arduous, and which caused his wound to become serious, he wrote to his daughter—"I want nothing from the whole world. What is

valuable to me it will never give me. If I could command the whole (army), I would give a great deal for that. I consider myself, compared with them all, quite capable of it. If I cannot have that, all things are indifferent to me. In battle I can always find a place. For distinctions I care nothing; as I do not receive those I have deserved, any other is an insult, and I should despise myself if I thought otherwise. All my orders and my life I would give to have the command in chief for one day."

Frederic William's ingratitude had hit him very hard. His wound took a turn for the worse, and a few weeks after writing the words just-quoted he died.