To What Extent Did General Helmuth von Moltke’s Military Innovations Lead to the Prussian Victory in the Franco-Prussian War?

**Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Historical Sources**

The research question is “To what extent did General Helmuth von Moltke’s military innovations lead to the Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian War?”

Helmuth von Moltke, who was born on 26 October 1800, lived in an age in which war was the norm, especially in Europe. Witnessing the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, and the American Civil War, Moltke initiated a variety of innovative reforms within the military when he was promoted to Chief of the Prussian General Staff in September 1858. His reforms, included: the mobilization of forces, the hierarchy within the Command System, and the tactics and strategies employed on the battlefield. These revolutionary changes changed the course of the Franco-Prussian War, and in turn, changed the way war was conducted.

There are two sources that are quite important in examining these innovations. One major work is Daniel J. Hughes’[[1]](#footnote-1) 1993 work, Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings[[2]](#footnote-2). This book focuses on Moltke’s tactics as a whole. The other piece of literature that is important in understanding Moltke’s revolution in the art of warfare is R.R. (Dicky) Davis’[[3]](#footnote-3) 2006 scholarly article, “Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian-German Development of a Decentralised Style of Command: Metz and Sedan 1870”[[4]](#footnote-4). Davis’ piece concentrates on the decentralization of command.

**Source 1**

Daniel J. Hughes’ Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings is a translated work from Moltke’s original writings that includes his thoughts regarding warfare and how to employ such tactics on the battlefield. Consisting of Moltke’s personal opinions as well as his own explanations, this work effectively informs the reader with the military science of the Prussian era as well as the impact that Moltke’s military reforms had on renovating the transportation system, delegating leadership tasks, and upgrading the General Staff. Additionally, although Moltke’s writings are based on his memory and perception, the supplemental analysis by Dr. Hughes provides a more balanced viewpoint to compensate for the flaws that may appear within this source due to the fact that Moltke composed his work after the conflict.

However, one significant limitation within this publication is that the book lacks the application of these military innovations throughout the various conflicts that Prussia was involved in during Germany’s unification. Also, the source does not provide readers with a perspective outside of the Prussian commander’s point-of-view. Despite this bias, Hughes’ fresh insight provides a greater understanding into Moltke’s military reforms and how they revolutionized warfare during this era as well as within the early segments of the 20th century.

**Source 2**

Another important source is a scholarly article that was written by R. R. Davis, a retired British Colonel. This piece primarily focuses on the changes within the Prussian command system. Moreover, Davis’ work provides a detailed and thorough analysis of Moltke’s reforms within Prussia’s Mission Command and General Staff. Davis asserts that these reforms paved the way for Prussian victories at Metz and Seden during the Franco-Prussian War. By being in the military, Davis sheds new light into this ‘chapter’ of warfare and leadership. Furthermore, the author’s military experience provides the reader with a greater understanding of 19th century warfare and how important effective leadership leads to success on the battlefield and in war.

On the other hand, as Davis remarks in the article, “The Prussian general staff system did not fit our culture so we went for a British compromise”[[5]](#footnote-5), that the Prussian military system was and is far different from the British model. Therefore, Davis’ perception may be slanted, providing a British perspective and not giving a full account of the era in which he is analyzing. At the same time, the source does not provide any details or examples of how Moltke’s reforms were utilized on the battlefield (other than at Metz and Seden), which makes the evidence not so sufficient.

**Section 2: Investigation**

On the morning of July 19, 1870, four days after the official vote to finance the war, the French government declared war on Prussia[[6]](#footnote-6), led to the rapid mobilization of the French army. There were mass demonstrations within the streets of France, rallying behind the cause of defending their country against Prussia. Patriotic fervor filled the air within France. Ten months later, the French emperor, Louis Napoleon, along with 83,000 encircled French troops, surrendered to the Prussian army after their defeat in the Battle of Sedan.

The Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian war not only paved the road for German unification, but also generated a debatable question among military officers and historians: possessing both inferior rifles[[7]](#footnote-7) and less experienced soldiers[[8]](#footnote-8), how could the Prussian army nearly annihilate the French army in the confrontations like the Battle of Metz and the Battle of Sedan? In this investigation, the question will be addressed by the discussion and analysis of the contribution made by General Helmuth von Moltke’s key thoughts and strategies in three main respects: utilization of railroads, upgrade of General Staff, and application of “Mission tactics”.

One integral change that Moltke made was the utilization of railroads for military mobilization. In the late-19th century, the identity of the battlefield had changed significantly compared to that during the Napoleonic Wars, which happened only several decades before. The rapid applications of more advanced weapons and railroads had made both the conventional frontal attack and flanking maneuver ineffective, leading to the popularization of wars of attrition. However, as Hughes indicated in his book, Prussia, which had moderate economic and military strength but faced many potential enemies around its exposed frontiers, was not capable of fighting wars of attrition.[[9]](#footnote-9) Realizing this issue, Moltke thus came up with a series of innovative reforms that emphasized effective mobilization, transportation, and deployment of military units via the employment of railroads to accumulate a superior number of forces to confront the enemy.[[10]](#footnote-10) Just as Moltke mentioned in his military writings, “The enormous influence of railroads on the conduct of war has unmistakably emerged in the campaigns of the last decade. They enormously increase mobility, one of the most important elements in war, and cause distances to disappear.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Therefore, although the French declared war first and took the initiative to assemble a sizable army of 400,000 regulars, the Prussians, who had developed a sophisticated railroad network in the last several decades, were capable of quickly mobilizing over a million of reservists and Landwehr troops from not only Prussia itself, but also from its allied German states to counter the French invasion.[[12]](#footnote-12) Understanding the importance of the railroad system in warfare, Moltke had ordered the construction of and development of six geo-strategic railroads, which connected the frontline with almost all major German cities such as Berlin and Hamburg. The Prussian army would then use this for their war against France. Meanwhile, the French only possessed four such lines, and some of their sublines still remained unfinished.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moreover, Wawro points out that nearly all Prussian railways were double-tracked or partially double-tracked, granting Germans the ability to move an average of fifty trains a day to the frontline. The French, however, had mainly single-tracked railroads, a maneuver of twelve trains per day was the result of their network.[[14]](#footnote-14) Therefore, as the French spent three entire weeks to gather an army crop by sending no more than an infantry battalion, artillery unit, cavalry squadron, or even a supply shipment for each train, the Prussians formed a considerable amount of forces within three to seven days, resulting in a strategic advantage of German forces at the initial phase of the war.

The railroad system was not the only reason for Prussia’s victory. A more advanced, well-developed General Staff had provided the Prussian army the ability to conduct military operations in an organized fashion. In fact, the revolutionary changes put forward by Moltke to the Prussian General Staff could be primarily accounted for the Prussian success of utilizing railroads, as previously discussed. While Dierk Walter[[15]](#footnote-15) argued in his research that “any improvement that occurred between the Wars of Liberation and the Wars of Unification took the shape of continuous progress, not of dramatic punctual changes,” [[16]](#footnote-16) several dramatic changes did actually occur to the Prussian General Staff under the leadership of von Moltke. After being appointed Chief of the General Staff, von Moltke divided the original Prussian General Staff into four separate departments, three concentrating on terrain-analyses and one specifically focusing on railroad-manipulations.[[17]](#footnote-17) By appointing staff members personally and carefully, von Moltke was able to gather a group of highly trained elites and distributed not only significant power but also entrusted them to issue orders decisively and accurately. Furthermore, in order to address the limited field command experience among the Prussian officers, he encouraged the staff officers to study as well as analyze international military strategies, tactics, and history in various historical campaigns.[[18]](#footnote-18) Hence, while engaging in battle against their French counterpart, most of whom had gained their military experience from the wars in Africa[[19]](#footnote-19), the Prussian regiments, who were well-trained by their General Staff officers, could constantly remain organized and maintain high morale, effectively compensating their potential weaknesses.

The efficiency of Prussian units was continuously maintained due to one of Moltke’s most distinctive military theories: Auftragstaktik, which means “Mission Tactics.” As he personally wrote that “No plan of operations survives the first collision with the main body of the enemy,”[[20]](#footnote-20) the Prussian commander firmly believed that an army and its commanding staff should follow a strategic objective instead of detailed orders on the battlefield.[[21]](#footnote-21) Therefore, all small infantry groups, for example, squadrons or even platoons, were granted the authority as well as the courage to fight on their own as long as they could follow a common doctrine made by the superior commander and accomplish their previously assigned goals or missions.[[22]](#footnote-22) From the description provided by Wawro, in the Battle of Metz and the Battle of Sedan of 1870, Auftragstaktik was proven to be very critical in two aspects: Firstly, as Prussian forces were spreading all over the battlefield, all striving for their characteristic missions, their firepower was maximized, and they caused chaos within the concentrated French army. Secondly, small platoons and even individual soldiers, all of them with distributions of meat, bread, and forage for three days, were assigned to secure and explore the battlefield. This significantly improved the efficiency of the Prussian army because soldiers did not have to return to their camps or headquarters for re-supplying purposes.[[23]](#footnote-23) Admittedly, Wawro indicated a possible disadvantage of Auftragstaktik: “Aggressive subordinates, determined to be first in on the action, had piled up unnecessary casualties in every clash with the French thus far.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Indeed, as von Moltke reflected after the war, that “The war required great sacrifices of the Germans, who lost 6,247 officers, 123,453 men, one flag, and four guns.”[[25]](#footnote-25) However, from a larger perspective, the heavy losses suffered by the Prussian army by using Auftragstaktik were compensated by the success of German unification, a long-term victory. Meanwhile, the French lost countless men in this battle with 21,328 officers and an additional 701,948 men were captured, which far exceeded the German casualty rates.[[26]](#footnote-26) Overall, Moltke’s application of Auftragstaktik aided in turning the tide of the war in Prussia’s favor, which ultimately enabled Germany to be unified as a country.

Despite there being differences among the aforementioned historians regarding whether or not von Moltke was the pioneer of modern warfare in the 20th century, one undeniable fact is that all of them concur that von Moltke’s innovations played a critical role in Prussia’s victory over France and in the development of a united Germany. Considering the fact that the Franco-Prussian war had forever influenced modern warfare, von Moltke could genuinely be regarded as “both an exceptionally skilled organizer and a great field commander”[[27]](#footnote-27) who initiated modern military concepts and organizational structures.

1. Daniel J. Hughes is an Emeritus professor at Air War College. His background in military strategy and tactics are important in understanding the writings of Moltke when studying the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Daniel Hughes, Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings (New York. Presidio Press), 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. R. (Dicky) Davis is a retired British Colonel who has strong background knowledge about military science and defensive tactics. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Colonel R. R. (Dicky) Davis, “VII. Helmuth von Moltke and the Prussian‐German Development of a Decentralised Style of Command: Metz and Sedan 1870”, Defense Studies (2006), 5:1, 83-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Colonel R. R. (Dicky) Davis (2006), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Geoffrey Wawro, The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871. (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 65. Geoffrey Wawro is an American Professor of Military History at the University of North Texas, and Director of the UNT Military History Center. The University of North Texas is well-known for its state-of-the art multimedia database and library for military history. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Stephen Badsey, The Franco-Prussian War 1870-1871 (Osprey Publishing, 2003), 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Wawro (2003), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hughes (1995), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hughes (1995), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hughes (1995), 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wawro (2003), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Wawro (2003), 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wawro (2003), 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Dierk Walter is a lecturer in Modern History at the Universities of Bern and Hamberg. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dierk Walter, “A Military Revolution? Prussian Military Reforms before the Wars of German Unification”, War in History, June 1, 2009: 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Davis (2006), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Davis (2006), 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Michael Howard, The Franco-Prussian War (Routledge Publishing, 2015), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Hughes (1995), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Davis (2006), 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hughes (1995), 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Wawro (2003), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wawro (2003), 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Hughes (1995), 278 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hughes (1995), 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Hughes (1995), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)