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THE KAISER'S GLOOMY CHIEF OF STAFF

Letters and Reminiscences General Helmuth von Moltke

A Review by
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ERINNERUNGEN, BRIEFE, DOKUMENTE, 1877-1916 (*Memories, Letters, Documents*, 1877-1916). *By General Helmuth von Moltke, Chief of the German General Staff*, 1906-1914. *Published, with a Preface, by His Widow, Eliza von Moltke, née Countess Moltke-Huitfeldt. Stuttgart: Der Kommende Tag A.-G. Verlag.*

ON Sept. 9, 1914, at the very outset of the great war, when the Battle of the Marne was scarcely over, General von Moltke, supreme head of all the German armies, wrote from his headquarters on the western front:

> Things are going badly. The battles east of Paris will result unfavorably for us. One of our armies must fall back, the others will be forced to follow. * * * We are bound to be suffocated in our struggle against east and west. How different it was when we began the campaign so brilliantly a few weeks ago—now follows the bitter disillusionment. And how we shall have to pay for everything which has been destroyed!

That was looking ahead with a vengeance! If ever there was a German who foresaw nothing but defeat and punishment for his native land, even in the days when the great majority of his fellow-countrymen were mad with anticipation of coming victory and world-domination, it was Helmuth von Moltke, nephew of the great von Moltke of Franco-German War fame, Chief of the German General Staff at the outbreak of the war in the Summer of 1914. Evidence of the gloom and misgivings which beset him from the very beginning of the struggle constantly recurs in the collection of letters and other documents bearing upon his career which his widow has just made public in an endeavor to clear the memory of her husband from the clouds overhanging it.

Not the least of von Moltke's worries was his imperial master. "I can war against foreign foes, but not against my own Emperor," he once remarked. He did not like Kaiser William's attitude toward the war at all. Writing from General Headquarters on the western front at the end of August, 1914, when the German armies were pouring into France and converging upon Paris, he said:

> I am glad to be here by myself and not at the Imperial Court. It makes me quite ill to hear the chatter that goes on there. It tears one's heart to realize how the high overlord is absolutely without an inkling of the seriousness of the situation. Already a "hurrah" spirit is arising which I detest.

Before he wrote the above lines he had completely lost trust in the Kaiser as a result of the latter's interference wtih the mobilization plans of the German General Staff before the beginning of hostilities. The Kaiser, writes von Moltke, ordered the general mobilization of the German Army on Aug. 1, 1914, at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. After issuing the order he suddenly summoned von Moltke to the Imperial Palace at Berlin and told him that, in view of the probability that England was not going to enter the war, the entire German Army should be deployed against Russia, instead of on both the French and Russian fronts, as it would be if the general mobilization plans, carefully drawn up years before, were carried out.

Von Moltke was in despair. He pointed out to the Emperor that mobilization, when once begun, could not be altered without creating the most hopeless confusion. He told the Kaiser that it was absolutely essential to let the mobilization proceed as planned; later on, he said, when the army was deployed both against France and Russia, the troops might be shifted in whatever way was thought best, but to try to get them all over to the eastern front while the original mobilization was in full swing would mean that a disorganized horde of soldiers, inextricably mixed up and without the necessary commissariat, would be dumped on the eastern frontier of Germany.

But the Kaiser was adamant.

"Your uncle would not have answered me as you have," was his rebuke to his Chief of Staff. And the weakness of character which strikes the reader again and again as a salient trait in the great von Moltke's nephew shows itself in the way he took the Kaiser's words.

"What he said pained me greatly," writes von Moltke. "I have never laid claim to being the equal of the Field Marshal, my uncle."

Imagine hard-bitten old soldiers like Hindenburg or the Grand Duke Nicholas of Russia emitting a humble whine like that!

Overriding his Chief of Staff's objections, the Kaiser ordered that the German division which, in accordance with the mobilization plans, was to traverse the territory of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg should be held up in its march so as not

to cause an unfavorable impression on England, which was still maintaining neutrality.

"It seemed as if my heart would break," wails von Moltke. "I was like a broken man and shed tears of despair."

"Do what you will with it," he told an Adjutant who held in his hand the order affecting the division headed toward Luxemburg, "I will not sign it." And he sat, "inactive, in gloomy mood," until late in the night, when the Emperor, having received news of a different tenor from England, ordained that mobilization should proceed according to the original plans.

This was done. But the gentle von Moltke's feelings had been hurt beyond repair. He sighs:

> I have been unable to overcome the impression caused by this experience. Something within me was destroyed which could not be built up again. My confidence and trust were shaken.

He did not last long as Chief of Staff, once the war was under way. The month of September, 1914, the second of hostilities, was not at an end when General von Falkenhayn assumed the direction of the German armies, though von Moltke was not formally relieved of his post until Nov. 3 of that year.

After recovering his health, which had broken down under the strain, he gave a number of forcible hints that he was ready again for active service, but he was not again employed.

During the short span of life remaining to him—he died June 18, 1916—he was outspoken in his criticism of German leadership in the war. Many of the drastic judgments he pronounced against von Falkenhayn and others have been collected by his widow and incorporated in the book which she has just issued. They are a curious blend of a prescience, which is at times uncanny, with a querulousness such as might be expected from a man of not particularly strong character suddenly thrust aside and doomed to inactivity at the very climax of his career.

Von Moltke coolly remarks that the German invasion of Belgium had been prepared by German army heads years before it actually took place in the Summer of 1914. In fact, he points out, the original plan of attack upon France in case of a war, as worked out by the renowned Count Schlieffen, called for an advance by the German extreme right wing through the southern part of Holland, as well as for the violation of Belgian territory by other German right wing troops. Von Moltke opposed this phase of the Schlieffen plan in order not to align Holland on the side of Germany's foes; he preferred, he says, to face the great technical difficulties caused by having to crowd the German right wing between Aix-la-Chapelle and the southern boundary of the Dutch province of Limburg rather than to be confronted with a hostile Holland.

As for Belgium, he foresaw protest on her part against the march of the German armies across her territory, but not actual armed resis-

tance. In this belief, he himself drew up a demand to the Belgian Government to allow the passage of the German troops, in which the King of the Belgians was assured that the integrity of his realm would not be impaired. In fact, von Moltke went even further by adding a clause to the effect that, provided Belgium conducted herself in a friendly manner toward Germany, she might possibly receive some additional territory as a reward. But this clause, avers von Moltke, was eliminated by the German Foreign Office when the ultimatum was delivered to Belgium.

The German leader's disappointment at the results of the violation of Belgium are of a purely military character—there is no hint that he looked upon it as morally wrong. He writes:

> To be sure, there is much to be said against an advance through Belgium, but the course of the operations in the first weeks of the war showed that it forced the French, as had been foreseen, to stand in the open field, and it proved that they could be beaten. The reason why France was not overthrown in the first onset was due to the prompt aid of England.

After losing his post as Chief of Staff von Moltke abandoned himself completely to the pessimism which had already been quite marked in him when he was still at the head of the German armies. He writes under date of Oct. 24, 1914:

> The success for which we had hoped has not come. It seems as if nothing more was ever to turn out well for us, and yet success must come if we are not to be crushed under the weight of our opponents.

He became an ardent partisan of seeking a decision on the eastern front and bitterly condemned the policy of von Falkenhayn, which denied to Hindenburg and Ludendorff (then in command only over the German forces of the Central Powers operating against Russia) sufficient troops to crush Russia once and for all and make it possible to turn the full German military strength against France and England on the western front. Under date of Jan. 10, 1915, von Moltke wrote a letter to the Kaiser in which he said:

> I have a most deeply rooted conviction that the war must be decided in the east. If, even at this late date, we can defeat the Russians so soundly as to be able to make peace with them France will soon give up resisting us. That will mean that your Majesty has as good as won the war. So long as Russia remains in the field France will sign no peace, nor will she make peace if we succeed merely in breaking through the Russian lines or inflicting upon Russia a partial defeat.
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> France will not and can not give up the fight as long as Russia has not been eliminated and while one English soldier stands upon French soil. England will take care of that. But once hope of Russian help is destroyed, England's power over France will likewise be broken. Therefore I

deem it absolutely necessary to utilize all the troops available for the purpose of crushing Russia, all the more so since Austria is evidently drawing constantly nearer to military collapse.

Von Moltke also went direct to the Kaiser with his hostile criticisms of von Falkenhayn, his successor as German Chief of Staff, taking care at the same time to point out to his imperial master that, in so doing he had no desire to be reinstated in his former post. (There is inconsistency, by the way, in this, since judging from what he says elsewhere, he would not have been averse to reinstatement). He writes to the Kaiser:

I am convinced that General von Falkenhayn is not adapted, either by character or endowment, to be the highest military counselor of your Majesty in these critical times. He is a serious danger to the Fatherland. Despite exceedingly strong will power and external appearance of possessing ability, he has not the inner strength of mind and soul to plan and carry through operations of wide scope. The operations proposed by him to your Majesty and carried out on the western front have produced no result. They constitute a strategy of neglected opportunities. Through his lack of foresight—I purposely refrain from saying through his ambition—we suffered heavy defeat on the Yser, thereby losing the opportunity to end the campaign against Russia by a prompt and decisive blow. * * * Our entire military situation is now so critical that only a complete success on the eastern front can save it. * * *

General von Falkenhayn inspires so little confidence in the army that new operations under his leadership must not be initiated. Even if he should now be compelled by circumstances to incline toward granting all the demands of the German High Command on the eastern front he will fail tomorrow to keep his promises, and the danger exists that he will create new obstacles in the path of our commanders in the east instead of supporting them to the limit of his power.

Russia within two months I do not know what will become of us. I do not mean this in a military, but in an economic, sense. * * * I have written to the Kaiser and the Chancellor—for the second time day before yesterday—and ruthlessly exposed the peril threatening us, but of what value is the voice of one who has been shoved aside? * * * If there is anybody who can yet save the Fatherland, I know that it is yourself and your Field Marshal.

A favorite word with von Moltke is "catastrophe." He loves it. It bobs up constantly in his writings. From the very outset of the war he foresaw catastrophe for Germany and he repeatedly said so. He must have been an awful bird of gloom! No wonder the sanguine and bellicose William Hohenzollern got rid of

him just as soon as he decently could. The melancholy Chief of Staff's croak of "Nevermore!" must have got on William's nerves; his endless repetitions of his beloved word must have caused a shadow to fall athwart that "place in the sun" of which William dreamed with such complacency!

Von Moltke makes some interesting remarks about diplomacy in general and German diplomacy in particular. He never thought, he says, that England would remain neutral in a war involving Germany; sooner or later she was bound to come to blows with her great rival on the European Continent. Therefore, he argues, the policy favored by the Kaiser and Bethmann Hollweg of doing everything possible to keep England neutral was foredoomed to failure. It would have been far more advantageous for Germany, to von Moltke's way of thinking, if she had come to some sort of an agreement with France or Russia, instead of relying upon England's neutrality. He writes:

> But our eyes were turned toward England as if hypnotized, and when she declared against us at the very outset of the war we stood alone with Austria, and with no prospect of obtaining any other ally, against the superior strength of our enemies.

Concerning diplomacy in general he makes this frank statement:

> The highest art in diplomacy consists, I think, not in preserving the peace at any cost but in permanently shaping the political situation of a country in such a way that it may be in a position to go to war with favorable prospects.

A large part of von Moltke's book is made up of letters bearing upon the earlier years of his long military career, before his appointment as Chief of Staff in 1905. In the 70s and 80s he was constantly in the company of his world-renowned uncle, Field Marshal von Moltke, the man who beat Austria in 1866 and France in 1870, and from the nephew's letters to his wife concerning the old veteran a clear and human likeness of the elder von Moltke emerges.

There are also interesting glimpses of the household of Kaiser William at Potsdam in the years before the war; of the little Princes, his sons, parading with toy muskets and going through the motions of being regular grown-up soldiers; of everyday happenings on the Kaiser's cruises in Norwegian waters, on some of which von Moltke accompanied him. But, of course, the pages dealing with the war crowd glimpses of peaceful times far into the background. Perusal of these war pages makes one suspect that von Moltke the younger, he who never laid claim to being the equal of his uncle, the Field Marshal, must have wished many a time that he had never got any closer to real battle than seeing the German Crown Prince and his little brothers march up and down with those toy

muskets of theirs in the palace of the Hohenzollerns at Potsdam.