

Knud Rasmussen. *General de Meza og den Dansk-tyske Krig 1864.* Odense: Odense University Press, 1997. 148 pp. 175.00 DKK, cloth, ISBN 978-87-7838-266-5.

Reviewed by E. Ladewig Petersen

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This small, but nicely printed and illustrated book concerns itself mainly with one of the central events during the Danish-German war 1864: the Danish army's retreat from its positions on the Danevirke, the ancient rampart between Slesvig and Holstein, the night between February 4th and 5th. The decision was taken almost univocally by the staff, headed by the commander-in-chief, lieutenant-general C.J. deMeza. It became immediately the point of departure for a prolonged and fierce conflict between deMeza, the secretary of war, colonel C.C. Lundbye and--more enigmatically--the prime minister D.G. Monrad, ending with the dismissal of deMeza.

These events--as well as the war itself--have often been described by both Danish and German military historians; so the aim of Knud Rasmussen's (former major and chief-librarian of the garrison library, Copenhagen) has not been to recount the story once again, but to arrive at an estimation of the political and military events as well as of the decision to retreat and of deMeza's dismissal. And, let it be said at once, the author has his hero--deMeza--and his villain: Lundbye, whereas Monrad's attitudes--or lack of such--remain a riddle.

Though a civilian incarnate the reviewer does not disagree with the author's main conclusions: that deMeza did not trespass the standing instruction, that the decision to retreat had become the only possible in front of the enemy's numerical

superiority, the harsh winter and the soldiers' sufferings, and, finally that Lundbye both misinterpreted the instruction, explained away his mistakes, and forced through his will against the warnings of the staff and king Christian, who (accompanied by Monrad) had visited the troops during the critical days. The attitude of Monrad--characterised by one Danish historian as usually demonic--vacillated and in the end he yielded before Lundbye's olympic temper. These conclusions, however, would need two reservations, though.

First, that Mr. Rasmussen's acquaintance with sources and secondary literature is not exhaustive. It remains a merit of his, that he has printed in the text as well as in the appendix many telegrams, vota etc., but central sources are lacking: this holds good, primarily, to the minutes of the state council, the exchange of telegrams during his visit between Monrad and the powerful director of the ministry of war, S. Ankjaer and a military historian's later inspection of Monrad's notes (now lost). As to the secondary literature the reader misses the late Dr. Erik Møller's two fundamental studies, proving, that C.C. Hall--Monrad's predecessor--had, by 1859, realised Bismarck's brutal aims, and, consequently chose a course of collision in the hope of the powers' guarantee of the integrity of the Danish monarchy and an alliance with Sweden-Norway; both hopes failed, and Bis-

marck could pursue his plans for the annexation of both Slesvig and Holstein.

This leads to the second reservation. While the analyses of the decision-making of the staff at Slesvig are satisfactory, that of the state council and parliament at Copenhagen remains far less so. From Monrad's adjutant we know, that he--an eyewitness--agreed with the decision of the staff, that he at his arrival to the Copenhagen railway station (from which he was smuggled through a sidewalk in order to escape the fury of the mob) contentedly rubbed his hands, and looked forward to calm down the spirits, running high in the parliament, and to become the master of the situation. In fact he did the opposite, probably having met Lundbye; he defected his former attitude and joined the condemnation of deMeza: *venit, vidit, sed non vincit*.

Interesting is, on the other hand, the author's presentation of the leading doctrines of the Prussian and Danish staffs before the outbreak of war. In the obvious footsteps of von Clausewitz, the Prussian commander-in-chief, Helmuth von Moltke took it for granted, that once war had been decided all military decisions were his, thus excluding the possibility of political interference. The doctrine cannot be tested, but we know, that his field-plan was ready--and approved by the king and Bismarck--in 1862, aiming at a crushing defeat of his enemy in open field; by the way, this only demonstrate once more the unscrupulous brutality of the newly appointed chancellor. Hall's conclusions proved right, and the conflict inevitable, because Bismarck wanted it.

By contrast, the Danish staff's plan aimed at a cunctator-strategy, the spread of the troops over big areas in order to arrest and delay the enemy, but it failed completely, because the staff expected the assault to take place only during the spring or early summer. And, more fundamentally, because the staff, according to the constitution, had to submit to the cabinet's political and military decisions. After the staff's decision to retreat from the

untenable positions at the Danevirke, deMeza--well aware, that Monrad had been informed exhaustively, ordered the telegraph line to Copenhagen interrupted, in order to prevent the enemy's possible interception, and--foremost--to prevent the interference of Lundbye and Ankjær. The fact remains, however, that Lundbye--he himself an officer--could not or would not understand, and that he abused this fact to blame deMeza for not keeping him informed and ajoin, for neglect of the exhausted soldiers' provisions, and, finally his stubborn decision to have deMeza removed. And Monrad was, evidently, under his spell.

In many ways Mr. Rasmussen's book is well worth consulting, written *sine ira et odio*, and (re)publishing several sources. Its shortcomings lie in the fact, that the military and political analyses have not been satisfactorily coordinated and do not suffice to sustain his conclusions, however careful and convincing.

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