

Klaus J. Bremm. *Von der Chaussee zur Schiene: Militärstrategie und Eisenbahnen in Preußen von 1833 bis zum Feldzug von 1866.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2005. 295 S. EUR 24.80, paper, ISBN 978-3-486-57590-3.



Reviewed by James M. Brophy

Published on H-German (May, 2008)

During the Rhine Crisis of 1840, Prussia's military staff estimated a march time of three weeks to move troops from the Elbe to the Rhine. By the end of the decade, however, troop movements were calculated in days. Whether beginning with troop transports during the Revolution of 1848/49, the deployment of French troops to the Crimea in 1853-54, or the decisive military role of railroads after 1859, mid-century army staffs adapted to this transportation revolution (and its communicative twin, telegraphy) with surprising speed. Klaus-Jürgen Bremm's cogent study examines the history of this transformation, meticulously documenting how the Prussian army adjusted to the railroad age, not only with regulations and procedures for mobilization but also with the tactical exploitation of speed and troop concentration. From the first army memorandum on railroads in 1835 to the full-scale mobilization of Prussian troops in 1864-66, Bremm's analysis of Prussia's evolving procedures and strategies is grounded in meticulous archival research. Moreover, the study's framework is comparative. Because competitive dialog between the continental powers of France, Austria, and Prussia drove policy changes,

the monograph's multinational perspective is crucial.

The first chapters examine the period from 1830 to 1850, when officers and civil servants first conceptualized the military advantages of railroads. To a large degree, Bremm strives to correct earlier accounts that see the Prussian state as only hesitant and irresolute in its long-term vision for railroads. By contrast, his close analysis of memoranda in the late 1830s evinces the military's growing interest in a railroad network that would connect all Prussian citadels, protect the Rhine against the French, and promote a line between Cologne and Berlin to convey troops. French legislative plans in the 1830s, Bremm shows, set into motion a competitive dynamic between the continental powers for the remainder of the century. While France's legislature possessed the advantage of authorizing capital debt, its contentious debates and rival commercial factions partially undermined parliamentary benefits. In this comparative view, Austria is initially characterized as a dilatory innovator, hampered by generals lacking foresight and a state fiscus that could ill afford

to build railways. Yet, that said, Austria nonetheless drew up the first uniform military regulations for railroad companies in 1847 and expanded its network in the early 1850s. Like Austria, Prussia also lacked a legislature to float large loans; any debt over twenty million thalers required authorization of a not-yet constituted national assembly, which rendered the railroad question a thorny political matter. Reluctantly, then, the state relinquished leadership, allowing the private sector to develop the capital-intensive industry. In spite of its financial constraints, Bremm argues, the War Ministry still enjoyed a high degree of influence in shaping railroad policy, for neither a trade ministry nor a legislature existed to defend civic and business interests. Although the War Ministry remained skeptical that railroads would supplant the state's road system, it nonetheless helped design a rudimentary network to fit military needs. Bremm thus judges Prussia in 1842 as the early continental leader in military uses of railroads—a claim that surely must be qualified by the state's inability to finance its eastern railway in 1847 or to secure a connecting route between its eastern and western provinces.

Subsequent chapters explore the multifaceted theme of the military's influence over the construction and administration of railways. For the period 1835-49, such key topics as legislation, tariffs, and interstate agreements loom paramount. For the critical period between 1850 and 1866, Bremm meticulously reviews state paper to consider the work between the war and trade ministries that produced a fully operable military network. Between Olmütz (1850) and the end of the Crimean War (1856), the Prussian military responded to changing tactics. By 1852, France's Paris-Strasbourg link, Russia's Moscow-Petersburg line, and Austria's improved infrastructure exerted pressure on the Prussian government to formulate new policy. Although scholars conventionally place laurels on Helmut Graf von Moltke for his use of railroads in the Six Weeks' War, Bremm directs the reader's gaze on his predecessor, Gen-

eral Karl Friedrich Wilhelm von Reyher, chief of the General Staff in the 1850s. He recognized the railroad's primacy for war and thus shifted the burden of troop transport to railways. In this decade, von Reyher designated vital operational lines; worked out obligatory building codes for rail cars and railway stations to service cavalry and artillery; drew up a handbook of military regulations for all Prussian railroad companies; and coordinated timetables that acknowledged railroads as the principle mode of transport in war time. Although Prussia never tested these plans in a full-scale mobilization in the 1850s, an operational timetable was in place by 1856. For Bremm, this year thus constitutes a pivotal moment. Railroad networks formed a central element of a state's existence; Prussia ceased to see military uses of railroads as secondary to those of commerce and industry.

However momentous, these changes still envisioned railroads in a strategy of defense; the tactic of speedy troop concentration for offensive attack emerged later in the 1860s. The last chapters thus trace the evolving process by which military staffs deployed railroads as an offensive weapon in the wars between 1859 and 1866. Alongside the telegraph and the breech-loading *Zündnadelgewehr*, these railroads changed the face of nineteenth-century military science. With telegrams and rail lines, centralized command in Berlin gained the advantage by orchestrating troop movement with speed, precision, and weather-impenetrable calculability. Whereas French strategists in the 1840s could still view the issue of who mobilized first as inconsequential for victory, this matter proved decisive by the 1860s. With Prussia's campaigns against Hanover and Hesse in 1866, the advantage of superior troop transport stood out. This lesson shaped the mass mobilization of the Franco-Prussian War, an enduring tenet that allowed railroad timetables to trump diplomatic negotiation in 1914. When the lights went out in Europe in August 1914, modern warfare owed its intrinsic conflict with political ends

to von Moltke's military-technical demands in 1866, which challenged and compromised the primacy of politics.

Bremm has admirably succeeded in what he set out to do. Specialists will benefit greatly from Bremm's detailed explanations of policy specifications and the scale and scope of railways' capacity to move armies in the mid-nineteenth century. But even those not involved in military history will profit from this study. In spite of excellent recent studies on nineteenth-century German railroads--such as those by Dieter Ziegler, Ralph Roth, Allan Mitchell, Colleen Dunlavy, and Eric Dorn Brose--Bremm has forcibly made the case that to interpret railroad policy, state building, and even political economy, one must do more than merely nod to the importance of the military. Above all, the author should be congratulated for embedding the story of Prussia's passage into modern warfare in a multinational perspective. Bremm's close comparisons with France and Austria are sensitive not only to the contingencies of the period but also to the interconnectedness of national railroad histories. His comparative perspectives furthermore soften claims of Prussia's "superior strength" and inevitable military victory against either Austria or France.

While persuasively reasserting the military's early impact on railroad construction and administration, Bremm's interpretive framework still does not encompass the entire range of forces that contributed to the changing balance of power within the Prussian state and its political economy. Prussia's rail network evolved not only from the needs of the military and the other areas of state life (trade policy, taxation, public works, and so on) but from negotiated settlements with the divergent interests of commerce, finance, and industry. (The clout of local and regional politics on economic development would only exert itself later in the century.) Whether regarding the state's failed bid to build the *Ostbahn*, or the protracted debates over the construction of the Rhine lines in

the 1850s, one sees a complex balance of influences and institutions that denied both the state and the private sector dominating roles. Neither the military, the private sector, the Landtag, nor the king's ministries had a monopolistic say over the use of railroads. The military yielded to private railroads through ministerial fiats and court decisions. One sees here the impact of civil society, rule of law, property rights, and a changing political nation, all of which impinged on notions of state prerogative and the traditional preeminence of military needs. In short, Bremm's source material, as broad and as comparative as it is, cannot tell the entire story. One can only hope that his innovative attention to the cooperation between the trade and war ministries will spur a future study that explores the roles of the judiciary, the Landtag, and public opinion in adjudicating conflicts between state and civil society over railroad development.

Finally, the author and Oldenbourg Verlag deserve much praise for the handsome apparatus that accompanies the text and notes: maps, charts, documents, and biographical glossaries. In view of such generous supplementary aids, the absence of a complete index--the scholar's most important tool--is all the more irksome.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: James M. Brophy. Review of Bremm, Klaus J. *Von der Chaussee zur Schiene: Militärstrategie und Eisenbahnen in Preußen von 1833 bis zum Feldzug von 1866*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14539>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.