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## Decisive Battle

And yet we had plenty of warnings, if we had only made use of them. The danger did not come on us unawares. It burst upon us suddenly, 'tis true; but its coming was foreshadowed plainly enough to open our eyes, if we had not been wilfully blind.

**GEORGE CHESNEY**, *The Battle of Dorking*, 1871<sup>1</sup>

On 1 September 1870 a French army, on its way to relieve another under siege at Metz, was enveloped and then overwhelmed at the battle of Sedan. A report described how ‘the battle had commenced at five in the morning, and at five in the afternoon the apparition of a French general waving a flag on the summit of the parapet of Sedan announced to the Germans their astonishing victory.’ The report continued with the subsequent note sent by the French Emperor Napoleon III to King Wilhelm of Prussia: ‘My brother, having failed to die at the head of my troops, I lay my sword at the feet of Your Majesty’.<sup>2</sup>

This described a classical, textbook military victory. The power balance of Europe had been transformed in a clash of arms, culminating in a battle that was concluded in a single day. That defeated party accepted that conclusion and the political consequences—except that Napoleon III was soon in no position to honour his promises to Wilhelm. He was deposed and the Third Republic was declared on 2 September 1870. The new government refused to accept the verdict of battle and decided to continue the fight. As the Germans put Paris to siege, the French raised new armies

in the rest of the country, including snipers, or *francs-tireurs* ('free shooters'), who caused heavy casualties and complicated the defence of lines of supply.

The German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck became increasingly anxious that prolonged resistance would encourage other countries to enter the war on France's behalf and so he demanded ruthless action. Yet even when Paris fell at the end of January 1871, after two months of siege, it then became the scene of a revolutionary uprising. The regular French Army in turn crushed the Paris Commune. Only then could Germany agree terms with the republican French government. These were harsher than they would have been had the initial verdict of battle been accepted, including the transfer of Alsace and part of Lorraine to Germany, as well as reparations of five billion gold francs.

Sedan demanded the attention of all those concerned with the military art. The German victory had been made possible by impressive mobilisation of its forces, appreciating the role of railroads in getting men to the front. By contrast France's chaotic response to its own declaration of war, into which Bismarck had goaded them, meant that it missed the chance to mount an early offensive. The power of modern artillery had been fully on display. The tactics of Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke showed how to manoeuvre with modern armies in a way that inspired later generations of military strategists. But if order had not been restored in the chaotic aftermath of Sedan the war would have been remembered differently. The Germans drew two crucial lessons. First, good strategy really could produce guidance for a quick victory in a regular war. Second, unless ruthless steps were taken, this victory might be thwarted should irregular resistance develop in a defeated nation.

In this case the resistance failed. It was also viewed as being something uniquely French, reflecting the country's insurrectionary traditions. For the moment, the main conclusion was that Germany was a very powerful state and an accomplished military actor, capable of moving boldly and ruthlessly against its enemies. The European order was now unsettled, with the balance of power weighted in its favour though its long-term intentions were unclear. Von Moltke's stunning victory reinforced a classical model of warfare despite hinting at its limitations.

**IN MAY 1871, THE MONTH IN WHICH THE TREATY OF FRANKFURT** formally concluded the Franco-Prussian War, *Blackwood's Magazine* in London published an anonymous short story, *The Battle of Dorking*. Written by Sir George Tomkyns Chesney, a colonel in the Royal Engineers, it caused such a sensation that it was soon available as a stand-alone pamphlet. It sold over 80,000 copies and triggered a national debate on the state of Britain's preparedness for war. This was the author's purpose. As Chesney explained in his original submission to his publisher, he sought to encourage the reorganisation of the British military system by demonstrating how England might be invaded 'and the collapse of our power and commerce in consequence'. His effectiveness can be measured by the fact that the furore prompted the prime minister of the day, William Gladstone, to complain publicly about how such alarmist talk could lead to unnecessary military expenditure sufficient to ruin the public finances.

Those seeking to counter Chesney's arguments often did so with their own fictional accounts, demonstrating that when you invent the story you can at least decide who wins.<sup>3</sup> These stories about the future made it possible to make polemical points with more vigour than reasoned argument or dissections of old campaigns. *The Battle of Dorking's* success meant that it became more than just a sensation of 1871: a whole literary genre was created that provided, in the years leading up to the First World War, one medium by which patriotic anxieties might be stirred, nationalism fed, military innovations described, and preparations assessed. Writing on the future of war was designed to demonstrate what might happen if governments failed to get the writer's message and then act upon it with urgency.

Chesney was not of course the first to write on this subject or to express his ideas in a fictional form. The Napoleonic Wars had produced a mass of literature imagining invasions in one direction or another, in which the unwary were caught by cunning schemes and devices. There was also a comforting 'desire to see the enemy as contemptible, inferior, and already defeated'.<sup>4</sup> What made a difference in Chesney's case was that he was a gifted writer and able to take advantage of the rise of the popular press, which had created a growing audience for such provocations. Discontent over the handling of the Crimean War in the 1850s had already

helped to move issues of war and peace out of the area of elite consultations and into democratic debate. In addition, his timing was excellent and not coincidental. Coming just after the German victory it reflected the pervasive belief, in retrospect perfectly justified, that the old order had been destabilised. Great-power relations would be in a state of flux for some time. If France with its famed army could be so defeated, who might be the victim of the next upset? In this uncertainty some vital development in weaponry or military methods might make all the difference, leaving the ill-prepared or faint-hearted badly caught out.

Chesney's story was about how Britain was invaded by a foreign power, not named but evidently Germany (the victorious invaders spoke German). The enemy had been hatching plans for some time. The moment to strike came when Britain's guard was down. The Royal Navy was more dispersed than usual on a variety of colonial duties, while the army was dealing with the Fenians in Ireland, an uprising in India, and a challenge to Canada from the United States. The Germans pounced, taking care to honour the formalities by at least declaring war. Telegraphic communication to Britain was cut off so there could be no real warning. A well-prepared invasion force was soon off across the channel, facing minimum resistance when it reached the shore. The narrator of the book was a volunteer, one of many called to a ridge between Guildford and Dorking where, with available regulars, they were to take on the enemy force. Unfortunately the enemy turned out to be far better organised and disciplined. The British fought, as one would expect, valiantly. But without decent intelligence, logistics, and leadership, they were overcome.

To get the requisite knockout blow Chesney had to ensure that everything went right for the aggressors, even before the point was reached where the unpreparedness of the British army made a real difference. The operational key to the German victory lay in overcoming the major problem facing any would-be invader of Britain, its double advantage of being an island and in possession of the world's most powerful navy. Those earlier anxieties about the possibility of Napoleon invading had supposed that the great moat of the English Channel could be overcome using methods such as tunnelling and balloons. In 1784 an anti-British American satirist imagined how 'if the English should venture to

sea with their fleet, a host of balloons in a trice they shall meet'.<sup>5</sup> Long after Napoleon had been seen off, the British continued to fret about all possible challenges to their naval supremacy, including that posed by steamships which offered increased speed and a capacity to overcome the limitations hitherto set by weather and tides. Chesney had the Royal Navy being caught out by a deft manoeuvre by the German fleet and then, most dramatically, by 'fatal engines which sent our ships, one after the other, to the bottom'. These he makes clear were torpedoes, although at the time the term was used to refer to the floating bombs that later came to be known as mines. It was only in 1870 that the first Admiralty trials took place of the propelled bombs that we now call torpedoes.<sup>6</sup> During the next decade navies began to fit them to both their capital ships and smaller vessels, and set in motion a debate about the relationship between the long-range big guns upon which they had previously relied and the new torpedoes with extra range but also uncertain accuracy.

Chesney was therefore up to date but did not move much beyond recent experience. For example, he made no mention of submarines, yet these turned out to be the most important imminent innovation in naval warfare. A crude form of submarine had been in use during the recent American Civil War, although it took until the end of the century for a more reliable version to be introduced by the French. More seriously, he showed little interest in the gruelling nature of the American war. Along with other Europeans he tended to assume that there was little to learn from the supposedly ill-disciplined and alcoholic American armies, other than what might happen with a swift and improvised expansion of relatively small volunteer armies into something much larger.<sup>7</sup>

According to Chesney the consequences of Britain's defeat were enormous. A once-proud nation was stripped of its colonies, 'its trade gone, its factories silent, its harbours empty, a prey to pauperism and decay'. It had been obliged to hand over its position as a leading naval power to Germany. This dire conclusion was solely the result of an attack that had caught the British completely by surprise. It was a surprise not only because of a sly military operation but also a lack of a triggering crisis. German success depended on there being no obvious reason to attack when it did. The war just happened because of an aggressive and

opportunistic enemy. As a result Britain's position in the international hierarchy was altered forever.

*The Battle of Dorking*, and its subsequent imitators, described an inglorious defeat but not a bloody slaughter or a long-drawn out, agonising conflict. All could be won or lost in a short time. A nation caught by surprise would have no hope of recovery from the first setbacks; once defeated it could expect no mercy.<sup>8</sup> Losing such a war meant a loss of sovereignty, a way of life, and a pattern of trade. In this melodramatic view, international affairs would be forever reconfigured by the decision of battle. When Prime Minister Gladstone denounced Chesney's pamphlet as alarmist and a scheme to spend public money, he observed, 'Depend upon it that there is not this astounding disposition on the part of all mankind to make us the objects of hatred.'<sup>9</sup>

Chesney, who eventually became a Conservative MP, did not share the liberal optimism of the free-traders, such as Gladstone, who looked forward to economic interdependence promoting peace by providing formidable disincentives to war. Chesney's world, shared by many of the military establishment, was one in which all could be lost in a misjudged campaign. This was a view of war which combined urgency with complacency. Military defeat would equal political disaster, but the war itself would not be so bad. The lesson to be drawn from this and similar tracts was that great powers must stay alert and prepare properly for the coming tests, but not that the whole character of war was undergoing a change.

**THIS WAS A CLASSICAL MODEL OF WAR, SHARED BY THE POLITICIANS,** generals, admirals, and commentators of the time. It was classical in that it was based on a deeply embedded understanding of what war was about and how it should be fought. This view could be traced back to the Greeks and Romans. It was an ideal type in that it was understood that in practice every war might not correspond to the model, and in some cases the deviations would be severe; but it was still the best guide to preparing for war. It was also normative in that it would serve the interests of governments best if war could be fought in this way. If war could be kept short and contained then it could be retained as a serviceable instrument of

policy while limiting its wider, disruptive social and political effects. Lastly, it was empirical in that Germany's success at Sedan confirmed the model, in a way that flattered its continuing validity and played down how it might be adapted in the light of the enormous changes then underway in science, industrial methods, forms of political participation, and the development of a mass media.

The wars of German unification—those with Denmark in 1864 and Austria in 1866 as well as France in 1870—led to the conviction that von Moltke's swift victories were the strategic precedents for the future. The German General Staff held to this conviction fiercely, and took exception to those who warned that future wars might not turn out so well, with victory coming only after a gruelling campaign of attrition rather than a swift battle in which the enemy would be annihilated. The belief framed thinking about future war elsewhere in Europe, not necessarily because that was how a war was bound to turn out but because the Germans had shown how it could be done and they might well do it again.

**THE MOST POWERFUL THEORIES OF WAR OF THE TIME WERE** those drawn from the Napoleonic Wars. The most influential theorist was Baron de Jomini who had served with Napoleon's army and was recognised as the keenest exponent of those principles of warfare exemplified by the Emperor. Following early writings which explored the campaigns of Frederick the Great and Napoleon, his *The Art of War*, first published in 1838, was the most widely accepted textbook for the armed forces of Europe, and a major influence in the United States. Napoleon himself claimed that Jomini had revealed his closest secrets.<sup>10</sup> During his lifetime he was much more celebrated than his contemporary, the Prussian Carl von Clausewitz, who is now considered to be the greater theorist. Jomini also outlasted Clausewitz by almost four decades, passing away aged 90 only a couple of years before Chesney published his pamphlet. In his book,<sup>11</sup> Jomini explored the dynamics of war apart from its political context. His advice was geared to explaining how generals needed to mass their forces against weaker enemy forces at some decisive point. Clausewitz, who remained more influential in Germany, had a keener sense of why plans went awry and the varied forms warfare might take, but his was still essentially a

theory of battle and the circumstances in which it could be decisive. From Napoleon through Jomini, confirmed by Clausewitz and then demonstrated by von Moltke, the core assumption was that a great commander would eliminate the enemy army in battle, and in so doing deliver the enemy state up for whatever humiliation and punishment the victorious sovereign thought appropriate. In their classical form battles would begin at first light and be over by the end of the day, when the winner would be the side occupying the battlefield. For a truly decisive victory the defeated army side would be so depleted by casualties and men taken prisoner that it could no longer serve as an effective fighting force. That being so, the enemy state would have to accept terms. When the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph was defeated by France and Sardinia in the 1859 Battle of Solferino, he conceded: ‘I have lost a battle, I pay with a province.’<sup>12</sup>

The assumption that wars could be settled by a well-constructed campaign, culminating in a decisive battle, was the received wisdom of the time. In 1851 Sir Edward Creasy published *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World: From Marathon to Waterloo*, which in its title and its premise confirmed the view that some battles were not only masterpieces of the military art but also, in their effects, a source of significant impact on world history. Creasy noted ‘the undeniable greatness in the disciplined courage, and the love of honour, which makes the combatants confront agony and destruction’, and also the intellectual power and daring of the most effective commanders. Unfortunately, he observed, these qualities were ‘to be found in the basest as well as in the noblest of mankind.’ He quoted the poet Byron: ‘’Tis the Cause makes all, Degrades or hallows courage in its fall.’

What mattered to Creasy was whether battles were part of

the chain of causes and effects, by which they have helped to make us what we are; and also while we speculate on what we probably should have been, if any one of those battles had come to a different termination.<sup>13</sup>

Turning points in history had regularly been marked by battles. There was no reason to assume that this pattern would not continue into the



future. Creasy's book set a challenge for those with their own favourite yet neglected battles to make a case for inclusion. There were regular updates which included the more recent 'decisive battles'. Thus when the book was republished in 1899, Gettysburg from the American Civil War and Sedan were added, along with contemporary encounters from the Spanish-American War.<sup>14</sup>

The appeal of battle lay in the thought that a climacteric encounter between two armies or navies, expending resources accumulated over decades, might, in a matter of hours, change history's course. Battles offered concentrated and acute drama as the fate of civilisations came to depend on the weaponry, bravery, and tactical acuity of a few—'we happy few, we band of brothers', as Shakespeare had Henry V say in his speech before Agincourt. But for battles to be 'decisive' depended on their influence upon a wider chain of events and not just who walked away alive and triumphant at the end of the day's fighting. The word 'decisive' had an air of finality, confirming that some large matter had now been concluded, but in other respects—unlike words such as 'victory' and 'defeat'—it was quite neutral. The decision could take the form of a negotiated settlement that left neither side satisfied. The essential feature was that they both accepted the result and that it reflected a situation largely achieved by military means.

There were specific battles upon which history appeared to have pivoted. Posit a different result from Napoleon's stunning victory over the Russians and Austrians at Austerlitz in 1805 and almost everything that happened thereafter looked different, or suppose Gettysburg had been lost and wonder whether the Union could have recovered. But a truly decisive battle was unusual. It was a rare war that turned on a single encounter. More often the difference made by individual battles could be understood only in the context of a wider war effort. Some of the most important battles were essentially defensive so that a war which might have been over quickly instead dragged on. Others had a cumulative impact, as one side's resources, reserves, and morale were steadily depleted because of successive defeats. Some gained their impact as they interacted with sieges (potentially as important as actual battle in shaping wars) or with irregular, guerrilla combat. Once all the other factors that determined

military superiority were acknowledged, then battle became a means by which these factors could be demonstrated, a way of proving a capacity that was always there. In this respect some battles deserved a 'landmark' status not because of the nudge given to history but more as revelations of a wider cultural and material superiority.<sup>15</sup> By confirming this superiority a battle was a form of 'proof' of what might otherwise only have been suspected, now presented starkly and without nuance so all would appreciate the message.<sup>16</sup>

The moment could still be fleeting, and the next battle might prove something else, perhaps about the previous loser's capacity for finding allies or reviving its national morale. The key question was not the difference made by individual battles but whether wars could be concluded quickly. For those starting wars this was always the hope and in some cases the expectation. If the enemy proved to be resilient then over time non-military factors would become progressively more important. When a decisive battle was being considered before a war as a speculative possibility or a planning directive, what was in mind was the first, designed with ingenuity, planned with care, and fought by fresh and fearless soldiers eager to do their duty, but not the very last, fought by exhausted and scared soldiers, wondering if they could survive the final encounter. A first battle catching the enemy by surprise and inflicting a blow from which there could be no recovery could help avoid a long war. This was the 'allure of battle' that led to states gambling on aggression. Few states knowingly entered into an attritional long war, yet that was often what they got, and they suffered as a result.<sup>17</sup>