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Political generals in Prussia-Germany: The Waldersee case

WP 2018-07

Bielefeld University



Universität Bielefeld

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**Centre for German and
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The paper has been written on the basis of a research stay conducted at the Secret State Archives Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Berlin, Germany. This paper aims at revealing the impact of the phenomenon of “political generals” on political and social development of Prussia-Germany. The research trip to Berlin was supported by the Centre for German and European Studies, St. Petersburg.

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Abstract

So-called “political generals” played a crucial role in Prussian-German history of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the importance of this phenomenon has been generally overlooked by historians and it is still regrettably understudied. This paper aims at revealing the impact of the phenomenon of “political generals” on political and social development of Prussia-Germany. Employing case study methodology, the paper focuses on a typical “political general” - Alfred Graf Waldersee. Analysis of his political and military career has helped to define the specific origins of this phenomenon, such as the features of power-political structure of Prussia-Germany, privileged status of its armed forces and peculiar mentality of Prussian political-military elite. Finally, the research has also revealed the limits of power and influence exercised by “political generals”.

Key words: “political general”, German Empire, Prussian army, Alfred Graf Waldersee, Great General Staff, William II.

Introduction

The term “political general” currently has two different meanings. It is often used to describe a military leader who was appointed to a high rank despite a lack of actual military experience, out of political considerations - “the men who owed their stars to their prewar political prominence” (Simpson, 2000). This term also refers to generals holding politically influential posts – for example, that of the Inspector General of the Bundeswehr (Birnbäum, 2018).

In the late 19th century German Empire, this term signified yet another phenomenon. Strictly speaking, there was no explicit definition of “politischer General”, but this phrase was widely repeated by journalists, politicians, and the general public. Respective connotations were unambiguously negative. The term “political general” was used predominantly by the opposition – the liberals, Catholics, and Social-Democrats.

A general could be labelled as “political” if he was constantly meddling in politics, no matter whether he held a political office or not. This rather vague term originated from the concept of clear separation between military and political powers: it was implied that a military officer had nothing to do with politics. In reality, however, there were many exceptions to this rule. By no means were all high-ranking officers interfering in politics characterized as “political generals”.

The best way to reconstruct the contemporary understanding of the notion of a “political general” is to examine the people to whom this term was applied. For example, Hermann Robolsky’s book “Political Generals at the Prussian Court since 1848” published in 1897 discussed ten military leaders (Robolsky, 1897). Half of them were Prussian army or navy ministers; the rest held no political office at all. The author defined political generals as the “advisors of the Crown without [political] responsibility” (Robolsky, 1897: V). Ernst Bethcke, writing thirty years later about roughly the same time period, mentioned six officers, four of whom had been previously included in the list of Robolsky (Bethcke, 1930).

Almost all military leaders who were referred to as “political generals” were involved in domestic politics. This phenomenon emerged as a part of the general modernization of political powers in Prussia after the revolution of 1848. The Prussian Kingdom was transformed into a constitutional monarchy which implied that the King had to share his political power with the parliament. The government became accountable to the House of Representatives. Political parties sprang up; domestic policy was being widely discussed by the general public. Every extra-constitutional involvement in politics was considered illegitimate by the liberals. Therefore, a high-ranking military officer could be labelled as a “political general” only if he engaged in political matters in unofficial or illegitimate way.

Armed forces traditionally enjoyed a special status in Prussian monarchy. The Officer Corps identified itself as the “first rank in the state” (Nipperdey, 1998: 223). The backbone of the Officer Corps was the Prussian nobility, which shaped the value system of the whole corporation. Military officers regarded themselves as the “vassals of the King” (Carsten, 1988: 154), attached to him by the bounds of mutual loyalty. No institution was allowed to interfere between them and their

royal sovereign. The political stance of the Prussian armed forces was deeply conservative, especially after the German Revolution of 1848. The army viewed any political opposition to the power of their monarch and commander-in-chief (such as the parliament, etc.) as subversive and pernicious. These considerations urged some generals to meddle in domestic policy - for the sake of the “divine order” and for the protection of their King. This interference had been mostly informal: high-ranking officers advised the monarch on political matters and sought to influence him, promoting the ideas of a “firm hand” and even of a military coup as an ultima ratio. For example, Edwin von Manteuffel (the Chief of the King’s Military Cabinet and one of the first “political generals”) supported William I’s uncompromised position against the parliament in the Prussian constitutional conflict of the early 1860s.

Unsurprisingly, this meddling entailed criticism and grievances voiced by the liberal opposition. The controversy focused primarily on domestic affairs. Foreign policy was considered a separate realm entitled exclusively to the monarch, and the involvement of the military in these matters was regarded as a more or less legitimate act. The conflict between the military and political elites in diplomatic affairs would become a matter of public concern only after the First World War. The Chief of the Great General Staff Helmuth von Moltke, who was featured among the “political generals” by Bethcke in 1930, had not been even mentioned by Robolsky in 1897.

The phenomenon of “political generals” is still regrettably understudied: This historiographical situation is quite surprising, as the lack of research on this topic contradicts the utmost importance of the phenomenon of “political generals” for the German history. “Political generals” played a substantial – sometimes crucial – role in political decision-making. To explore the power of “political generals” and to assess their influence on political and social development of Germany-Prussia, their careers should be closely examined.

However, this research objective faces an obvious problem: there have never been two identical “political generals”. The personal factor always played an important role. At the same time, the careers of “political generals” with their opportunities and limitations generally developed along the same lines. Therefore, it is possible to reach valid conclusions by studying a single but relatively typical case – the case of Alfred Graf Waldersee.

Methodology: Case Study

The paper employs case study methodology to explore the phenomenon of “political generals”. According to John Gerring, “a case study may be understood as the intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases” (Gerring, 2007: 20). Case study research is often used when the total number of cases representing a phenomenon is not significant, while the cases themselves are rather peculiar (Vlasova, 2012: 256). However, case study methodology requires awareness of its inherent limitations, primarily the danger of unrestricted generalizations.

The essential prerequisite of case study research is careful selection of cases. Random sampling is inappropriate. A case should be chosen by means of thorough cross-case analysis (Gerring, 2007: 90). Thus, there are several reasons grounding the appropriateness of the choice of Waldersee for a case study of a “political general”.

First of all, the contemporaries of Waldersee almost unanimously labelled him as a “political general”. Both Bethcke and Robolsky included Walsersee into their lists of “political generals”. Waldersee’s political activities had been extensively covered by the press and had always attracted attention of German public opinion.

Secondly, Waldersee undoubtedly moved beyond the area of his immediate responsibility. For example, Helmuth von Moltke meddled only in the politics within his purview, which was the matters of national security. Unlike him, Waldersee sought to influence almost every area of domestic and foreign policy.

Finally, during the short climax of Waldersee’s career, military institutions reached the peak of their political influence on the Prussian Kingdom - German Empire (at least during the peacetime). Thus, the case of Waldersee demonstrates the limits the “political generals” experienced in Prussian-German political system in their search for power.

In other words, within the context of the phenomenon explored in this paper, Waldersee’s biography provides a perfect example of a “political general” who was the very embodiment of this concept.

Alfred Graf Waldersee and German Politics

Even though Waldersee was a very influential figure of his time, he is rather forgotten today, his life and career being understudied by historians. Alfred Graf Waldersee was born in 1832. His father was a Prussian military officer of high standing. Needless to say, Alfred was destined to become a military too. In 1850 he entered the Prussian Officer Corps. Nevertheless, his career was not confined solely to military matters: in 1860 he was appointed a tutor to a young prince from a small German state; in 1865 — an adjutant of Prussian prince Karl, brother of the King and the Inspector General of Artillery. Due to the latter appointment Waldersee managed to establish important contacts at Prussian Court. After the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 he was assigned to the Staff of the 10th Army Corps. Waldersee realized the political significance of this appointment – his troops were based in the former Kingdom of Hannover that had been annexed by Prussia in 1866. Anti-Prussian sentiments were strong in the recently acquired province. Waldersee voluntarily monitored public opinion in Hannover and kept on sending relevant reports to Otto von Bismarck, the head of the Prussian government.

This tactic proved to be successful. A young and ambitious officer was noticed by the “Iron Chancellor” and became his protégé. In Berlin Waldersee was considered a suitable candidate for a political-military appointment. In the beginning of 1870, he was designated as the Prussian Military Attaché in Paris –

a highly significant post in diplomatic respect. During the Franco-German war of 1870-71, Waldersee acted as a personal adjutant of the King. After the war, he obtained his first entirely political appointment of the Prussian charge d'affaires in Paris. This nomination was intended to be only temporary and lasted for just a few months; however, Waldersee demonstrated remarkable diplomatic skills and was praised by both William I and Bismarck. Afterwards he was periodically viewed as a possible candidate for various prominent posts in the German foreign office – from ambassador to even the head of the Foreign ministry (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 12, Bl. 26).

In the 1870s, Waldersee continued to serve within the Staff of the 10th Army Corps in Hannover, while strengthening his ties with the Court and with the political leadership of the newly created Empire. He took great interest in domestic and international affairs, paying special attention to political processes in Germany and abroad – for example, the debates on customs duties raging in the German parliament (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 12, Bl. 6). His diary reveals that by that time he considered himself possessing considerable expertise in the fields of both domestic and foreign policy.

In 1882 Waldersee was appointed the Quartermaster General to the Prussian Great General Staff, which in fact meant being a deputy chief of this important military institution. The General Staff was responsible for strategical planning and other important aspects of preparation for a potential war. The officers of the General Staff claimed their right to be consulted in foreign affairs due to both their responsibility and expertise in the field of national security. Waldersee advocated a tougher foreign policy such as a preventive war against Russia and/or France. He was convinced that with a new European war unavoidable, in order to win, Germany had to start it itself in the appropriate time to prevent the enemies of the Empire from arranging an onslaught. Waldersee enjoyed full support of his commander, the famous strategist Moltke, and established a sort of “parallel diplomacy” in relations between Germany and its closest ally, Austria-Hungary. These efforts led to a growing conflict between these generals and Otto von Bismarck, who considered such actions illegitimate interference in his own realm.

However, what made Waldersee a “political general” in the eyes of the public was not the involvement in diplomatic affairs, but his relationship with Prince William, the future heir of the German throne, the relationship, which made Waldersee one of the most influential people in the country. The young Prince found in Waldersee a close friend, a “substitute of the father” (Röhl, 2001: 464); he discussed with the General the secrets of his intimate life and problematic relations with his parents (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 13, Bl. 14). The General and the Prince shared similar worldviews and values. William “is full of friendship and affection for me”, Waldersee wrote in his diary in 1886 (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 13, Bl. 49). The closer the Prince was to the accession of the throne, the greater became the influence of his friend.

William II became German Kaiser in the summer of 1888. Shortly afterwards, Waldersee was appointed the Chief of the Prussian General Staff. It was the peak of his military career, as well as of his informal influence. The monarch sought his advice on many issues, including foreign and domestic policy. William often

visited his friend and walked with him in the Tiergarten. The growing influence of Waldersee increased his antagonism with Bismarck. According to Lamar Cecil, “there was hardly an area of foreign or domestic policy on which Waldersee failed to disagree with the Bismarcks” (Cecil, 1989: 140). In his diary, the General had repeatedly and profoundly elaborated on the “pernicious” effects of Bismarck’s politics.

Close relationship between the young Emperor and his Chief of the General Staff had not remained unnoticed by the public. The German press extensively discussed the informal influence of Waldersee and denounced his political ambitions, treating him as “the coming man”. A widespread view (which historians also supported) was that the General strived to be promoted to the post of Imperial Chancellor, to succeed to Bismarck. In a recently defended master’s thesis, an attempt has been made to challenge this view (Trosclair, 2012), but the author’s arguments were not entirely convincing. It is more likely that Waldersee was ready to accept the appointment, however, he was not striving to obtain it at any cost. “After one or two successors break their necks, we will talk about it,” he wrote in his diary (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 15, Bl. 14).

Waldersee had played an undeniably crucial role in Bismarck’s resignation in 1890. According to Graf von Hutten-Czapski, “William would never start the struggle against Bismarck without skillful encouragement from Waldersee” (Krausnick, 1942: 282). Although this statement is a slight exaggeration, the Chief of the Great General Staff did indeed contribute significantly to the success of the anti-Bismarck plot by utilizing his informal connections and influence. “I explicitly expressed my opinion of the chancellor to the Emperor, this time mercilessly,” he stated in his diary in the midst of the crisis (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 16, Bl. 34).

However, at the very time of this struggle, the personal relationship between Waldersee and the young Kaiser was deteriorating. William II was finally irritated by Waldersee’s constant meddling in his affairs and by his ambitions (Röhl, 2001: 465). He grew similarly reluctant to follow a hardline course proposed by Waldersee. The powerful position and the policy of the General generated bitter enmity between him and other influential figures in the Kaiser’s immediate circle. “He is a little dictator, holding the right to meddle in everything,” wrote Friedrich von Holstein, the “grey Eminence” of the German Foreign Office (Eulenburg, 1976: 631). In the beginning of 1891, the “political general” was dismissed from his influential post in Berlin and sent to Hamburg as a corps commander – a sort of an honorary exile.

Waldersee did not reconcile himself to the loss of his former influence. He maintained some of his connections at Court and political circles in Berlin and eagerly followed political news and gossips. Until the middle of the 1890s, Waldersee was still considered an appropriate candidate for the chancellorship by some political groups, which felt the need for a “firm hand” (Nachlass Waldersee, A I Nr. 21, Bl. 90). The General himself sent several long memoranda to the monarch, urging him to suppress the rising social-democratic movement (Waldersee, 1922: 386-389). “If the struggle is imminent, and, in my opinion, that is the case,” Waldersee wrote, “the state will gain nothing by attempting to

postpone it. (...) I believe that the best policy for the state will be not to allow the social-democratic leaders to set themselves the starting point for the great fight, but to accelerate its approach as much as possible. The state is still capable of effectively suppressing any kind of insurrection” (Waldersee ,1922: 388).

However, Waldersee’s time had never come. He played a minor political role only in 1900-1901 upon his appointment as the Commander-in-chief of multinational armed forces in China. He died in 1904, deeply pessimistic about the future of his country (Waldersee, 1923: 232).

For many years every move of Waldersee was watched closely by the general public. The news about his possible appointments and his dismissal used to produce a flurry of newspaper articles. He gained a reputation (and not without a reason) of a schemer and warmonger – a view shared by historians to this day (Röhl, 1993: 600). His putative informal influence as well as the influence of his wife, a famous Christian activist and a friend of the young Empress, remained a subject of countless gossips and rumors. Until his dismissal, many people considered the Waldersees to be the most influential couple in Germany (Hutto, 2017: 17). The Waldersee’s approach to politics undoubtedly played a major role in drawing the German public’s attention to the phenomenon of “political generals” and their power. “Graf Waldersee was a political general,” a newspaper article argued in February of 1891. “He thought he was destined to ascend from his military position to the highest office in the state” (Neue Freie Presse, 1891). Waldersee eventually disappeared from the political stage, but public discussion of the role the armed forces played in the state politics continued.

After Waldersee was discharged, the influence of the Great General Staff decreased. Nevertheless, the German military elite still carried political clout in the sphere of national security, and the army remained an important factor in domestic politics (as the Zabern affair had demonstrated in 1913). Generals played a significant role in German decision-making in the July crisis of 1914. During the war, their influence increased enormously, culminating in a de facto military dictatorship of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff (1916-1918). Prussian military elite survived the defeat of Germany and became a valuable ally for the new republican government. During the Weimar period (1919-1933), the German army remained a “state within a state”, an autonomous organism almost independent from the civil authorities. The military elite retained its system of values and contributed considerably to the domestic politics, especially during the periods of uncertainty and crisis. “Political generals” of this era included such prominent figures as Hans von Seeckt, Kurt von Schleicher and obviously Paul von Hindenburg, who became the president of Germany in 1925. Although he retired from military service, Hindenburg retained the mentality of a Prussian general, maintained strong connection with the armed forces, and welcomed advice from the military elite. Several years later, this elite would do its part in the appointment of Adolf Hitler. After the Second World War, the phenomenon of “political generals” irrevocably disappeared, with the army being controlled by the state and integrated into civil society.

Conclusion

The analysis of Alfred Graf Waldersee's career and political actions has led the author to several important conclusions. Waldersee, quite typically for many of his fellow military officers, considered interference in political realm perfectly legitimate. He did not draw the line between defending the monarch from foreign armies and from domestic threats. Waldersee considered it his duty to serve his King in every possible way.

This worldview was widely shared by the monarchs and other political leaders of Prussia. Even Bismarck, who was rather distrustful of the generals, did involve Prussian military officers (especially Waldersee) in political missions. Conservative political leadership considered the armed forces the bulwark of the throne. Moreover, the Prussian military and political elite concurred on the idea that the army should stay out of the parliamentary control. The close connection between the monarch and his military officers allowed 'political generals' to gain strong informal political leverage. Waldersee was probably the one who used such influence to utmost extent by becoming the closest friend and main advisor of William II. This would never have happened if the last German Emperor had not viewed himself as a part of the army and a proponent of its values.

However, Waldersee's fall from power clearly indicates that the influence of "political generals" had its limits. Considering himself not only a loyal subject but the guide and advisor of the King ("more monarchist than the monarch itself"), Waldersee overestimated his influence. His attempt to become the dominant actor of German politics united his enemies, who created a broad coalition against him. The Emperor eventually supported this coalition and dismissed Waldersee, disaffected by his intrigues and ambitions. German Empire was not just "a police-guarded military despotism" (Marx 2000: 611); political leaders used to limit and control the political influence of "political generals", not allowing them to dominate German politics over long periods of time. Nevertheless, sometimes the influence of the military on political decision-making was significant, with the role of Waldersee in the resignation of Bismarck being an impressive example.

The phenomenon of "political generals" occurred in Germany due to a combination of historical circumstances. The most important were the permanent confrontation between "conservative" government and "liberal" members of parliament; distinctive extra-constitutional position of the armed forces in the state; staunchly conservative, "medieval" system of values of the Prussian/German officer corps; the informal influence of the military elite on the monarch. This led to massive interference of Prussian generals into the politics of the state and to a widespread public concern about this interference. However, the impact of "political generals" on German history should not be overstated. In many cases, their influence was restrained and the career of Waldersee clearly demonstrates the limits of their power. Nevertheless, the military elite contributed considerably to decision-making in Germany, resisting the democratization inside the country and making the foreign policy stiffer and more aggressive. Therefore, the "political generals", however limited their power was, still bore their part of responsibility for the "German catastrophe" of the 20th century.

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