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N. 6
2025

Fascicolo 23. Luglio 2025
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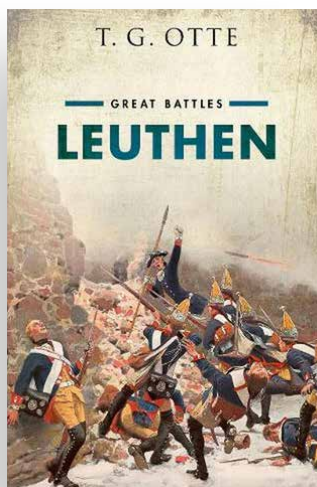


Stendardo di Lepanto (1570), Lati A e B, Museo Diocesano di Gaeta. Wikimedia Commons. Lo stendardo fu dipinto a tempera su seta da Girolamo Siciolante da Sermoneta (1521-1575), su incarico del Cardinale Onorato Caetani. L'11 giugno 1570 fu benedetto da Papa Pio V nella Basilica di San Pietro e consegnato a Marcantonio II Colonna ponendolo al comando della flotta pontificia. Partito da Civitavecchia e giunto a Gaeta il 22 giugno 1571, Marcantonio Colonna, fece voto di consegnare lo stendardo al patrono della città qualora fosse tornato vincitore. Il 13 agosto Pio V fece consegnare un secondo stendardo della Lega a Don Giovanni d'Austria, comandante generale della flotta cristiana che, riunitasi a Messina, salpò il 24 agosto verso Lepanto. Durante la battaglia del 7 ottobre i due vessilli sventolarono rispettivamente sull'Ammiraglia e sulla Capitana pontificia e non furono mai centrati dal tiro nemico. Nelle stesse ore il papa ebbe la visione della vittoria e in ricordo rifinì l'Ave Maria nella forma attuale, aggiunse le Litanie lauretane alla recita del Rosario e l'appellativo mariano di *Auxilium Christianorum* e consacrò il 7 ottobre a Santa Maria delle Vittorie sull'Islam, celebrato con lo scampanio al mattino, a mezzogiorno e alla sera in ricordo della vittoria. Papa Gregorio XIII trasferì poi la festa alla prima domenica del mese di ottobre intitolandola alla Madonna del Rosario. Al ritorno da Lepanto, Marcantonio Colonna sciolse il voto consegnando lo stendardo al vescovo Pietro Lunello. Il vessillo fu poi conservato presso la cattedrale dei Santi Erasmo e Marciano.

T. G. OTTE

Leuthen

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, pp. 275



In the late XIX century the responsibilities for the outbreak of the Seven Years War were as hotly debated as the origins of the First World War in the past century. Franz A. J. Szabo reminds us that the outbreak of the former bears many similarities to that of the latter: Prussia in 1756, feeling threatened by encirclement by an entente of three European powers, opted for a preventive attack against «what was perceived as the most implacable» of the enemies, not unlike what Germany did in 1914. Likewise, Prussia decided to carry into effect such an attack against Austria by first invading a third power – Saxony – while Germany launched its attack against France by first overrunning Belgium.¹ In both of these cases the bold offensives orchestrated by Berlin, far from solving the diplomatic quandary it was facing, triggered the very same defensive alliances it felt threatened by, in turn resulting in larger wars than Prussia and Germany

¹ Franz A. J. SZABO, *The Seven Years War in Europe, 1756-1763*, Harlow, Pearson Longman, 2008, p. 1.

had anticipated. In his brilliant *Leuthen*, T. G. Otte cares to stress that such a resemblance between the two situations is not fortuitous: «in this manner Frederick laid the foundations of the notion that Prussia's *Mittellage* (encircled position) necessitated and so legitimated preventive war as a tool of statecraft, a notion that was to exercise considerable influence on the thinking of the German leaders up to the middle of the twentieth century».²

Aside from the influence exerted by such a precedent, though, it is quite apparent that, both in 1756 and 1914, the military solution came into existence because of a fundamental diplomatic failure. As for Frederick of Prussia, the king realised too late that the Westminster Convention played into the hands of Kaunitz, bringing about that rapprochement with Paris and the *renversement des alliances* whose ultimate goal, according to the Austrian chancellor, was to give Vienna a free hand in recovering Silesia and beating Prussia into submission, thus «reasserting Habsburg leadership in the Empire».³ Likewise, in the years leading to the July Crisis, the expiration in 1890 of the Insurance Treaty between Germany and Russia paved the way to a Franco-Russian military convention in 1892 and then to a formal defensive alliance in 1894, thus conjuring up for Berlin the spectre of a war on two front.⁴ As perceptively stressed by Klaus Hildebrand, though, it was the menace that the Tirpitz Plan posed to the vital British maritime interests to bring about that “strategic revolution” which implied London's increasing commitment to the continental affairs.⁵ With the Entente Cordiale of 1904 and the Asia Convention of 1907 the new *Mittellage* of Imperial Germany was thus complete.

It fell upon Alfred von Schlieffen to address the dilemma of the war on two fronts and come to a solution for breaking the encirclement. In this respect not only did the pre-emptive invasion of Austria via Saxony provide «a moral justification

2 T. G. OTTE, *Leuthen*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 67.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

4 Already on 21 July 1890, in a letter to the new chancellor Leon von Caprivi, Paul von Hatzfeld rather foolishly addressed the «alliance between France and Russia in the next European war» as «inevitable», thus proposing Italy's inclusion in the Triple Alliance as an «absolutely imperative» counterweight. See Norman RICH, M. H. FISHER (Eds.), *The Holstein Papers, Vol. 3, Correspondence, 1861-1896*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 349.

5 Klaus HILDEBRAND, “The Sword and the Scepter. The Powers and the European System before 1914”, in Hans EHLERT, Michael EPKENHANS, Gerhard P. GROSS (Eds.), *The Schlieffen Plan. International Perspectives on the German Strategy from World War I*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2014, pp. 21-22.



Alfred von Menzel, *Frederick the Great addresses his Generals before the Battle of Leuthen in 1757* (1860), particular. Berlin, Alte Nationalgalerie.

Foto Sailko 2018 CC SA 3.0. Wikipedia Commons.

for such an operation in the future, most likely against France»;⁶ true to the *applicatorische Methode*, the battle of Leuthen – and, specifically, the oblique order used by Frederick to crush the Austrian left wing – also proved instrumental in justifying Schlieffen's emphasis on aggressive solutions whose aim, in his own words, was «to concentrate the available forces against one of the enemy's wings».⁷

The final goal was the envelopment (*Umfassung*) and annihilation of the enemy forces. In that regard Otte has the merit of pointing out something that has usually been overlooked by those who studied the German war planning before the Great War: while Cannae provided Schlieffen with an intriguing label for his operational model, this was in its essence a replica of Leuthen and such a Cannae-style operation was usually referred to as the *Leuthener Programm*.⁸

Before delving into the legacy of Leuthen in the history of German strategic

6 OTTE, *Leuthen*, cit., p. 136.

7 *Dienstschriften I*, 61 and 63; quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 143.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145.

thought and German culture *en général*, the author also provides some useful correctives to the premises and course of the battle itself as treated by previous accounts. For instance, in countering the traditional notion that the premature reinforcement of the right wing with the reserves – whose unavailability would later be decisively felt on the left – was the result of a decision primarily made by Prince Charles which Daun had some reservations about, Otte remarks that «this was as much Charles' decision as Daun's».⁹ After all, to regard the possibility of an attack by Frederick as highly unlikely, given the numerical superiority enjoyed by the Austrian forces, was part of the military wisdom of the day. In conclusion, one of the many merits of Otte's book on Leuthen is precisely that it traces the genesis and development of the modern concept of flanking manoeuvre from the beginning of the Frederician oblique order,¹⁰ through the operational formalisations of the General Staff in the XIX century, slowly broadening its scope until touching upon the German share of those political and military assumptions that laid the foundations of the conflict with which the decline of the Westphalian System began.

MARCO MOSTARDA

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 219 n. 52.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 98. As customary, Otte attributes to Epaminondas and the Theban formation at Leuctra the merit of having probably served as an example to Frederick's oblique order. In consideration of the enduring prestige of the *imitatio* of the classical military institutions, it is pretty apparent that this was what the Prussian king wanted the others to believe. In this respect it is worth mentioning that Frederick was an attentive and critical reader of Folard, whose ideas on the columns and the necessary revival of the pike were delivered *sub specie* of a voluminous commentary on Polybius. Also significant was that Folard had written a *Histoire d'Épaminondas* (Paris, Didot, 1739): it is worthy of consideration as a possible source of inspiration. In any case, a comprehensive systematisation of the "battaglia d'ala" – i.e., the force concentration on a single wing, while "refusing" the rest of the formation, in order to outflank the enemy and crush them – had been already provided by Raimondo Montecuccoli in his second treaty *Delle Battaglie*. Given that in the XVIII century Montecuccoli was considered the most distinguished modern military thinker, and that his works were widely cited and admired, we believe that it is likely that Frederick derived the basis of his oblique order from the *Delle Battaglie*. As for Frederick reader of Folard, see "Avant-propos de l'extrait tiré des Commentaires du Chevalier Folard sur l'Histoire de Polybe", in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand, Tome XXVIII*, Berlin, Imprimerie Royale (R. Decker), 1856, pp. 109-114. As for the wide circulation of Montecuccoli's works, see Azar GAT, *The Origins of Military Thought. From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 15. As for Montecuccoli's "battaglia d'ala", see "Delle battaglie – Secondo trattato" in Raimondo LURAGHI (Ed.), *Le opere di Raimondo Montecuccoli, vol. II*, Roma, USSME, 2000, pp. 614-616.



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