

The Birth of the Professional Officer

reviewed by Capt Robert N. Ellithorpe

THE ENLIGHTENED SOLDIER:
Scharnhorst and the *Militarische Gesellschaft* in Berlin, 1801-1805.
By Charles Edward White. Praeger
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In describing the French victory over the Prussians at the battle of Jena-Auerstadt in 1806, David G. Chandler stated, "Seldom in history has an army been reduced to impotence more swiftly or decisively." The Prussians lost because they suffered from a defective command structure, operated with an outdated doctrine, and possessed a complacent officer corps that preferred to rest on its laurels rather than educate itself in the art of war. How can a nation overcome such glaring deficiencies while simultaneously facing occupation by a conquering army? Charles White answers this question in his book *The Enlightened Soldier*.

White's central thesis is that this remarkable transformation was largely the work of one man, LtCol (later Gen) G.J.D. von Scharnhorst. The fact that Scharnhorst accomplished this task in six short years has been called "one of the most remarkable feats in military history." Scharnhorst's primary tool in this task was education. Scharnhorst introduced the Prussians to a concept called *Bildung*, which is essentially the "well-balanced relationship between character and intellect." The concept of *Bildung*, which was central to the beliefs of Scharnhorst, had a heavy impact on his development as a soldier, and according to White was the cornerstone to his reform program. Literally translated into English, the German word "*Bildung*" means culture. However, its real meaning is the "perfectability of the individual's character and intellect through education." Scharnhorst realized "that disciplined intellect was essential to the profession of arms." He was not simply trying to change the military system. He was attempting to foster an attitude that was receptive to education and the building of character.

Scharnhorst learned in his early years that "the profession of arms was a continuous process of development that could not be mastered by simply

learning existing techniques." The author points out that "the profession of arms demanded a broad, general education for its mastery." The art of war is a dynamic field. The military officer must not only stay abreast of current changes, but also provide forethought as to its future course. White states that "because he understood the past, Scharnhorst was able to see the dawn of a new era in warfare." This is the mark of the true professional—one who can learn from the past, adapt it to the present, while preparing for the future. Scharnhorst was able to do this because he practiced *Bildung*.

White believes that "only through *Bildung* could Prussia meet the challenge of Napoleon." He states that the level of education of the Prussian officer corps was the most serious shortcoming of the army at this time. In White's opinion, "The army had become anachronistic in its doctrinal concepts." Scharnhorst "understood that war could not be studied in isolation" and he desired to "develop leaders who would be capable of formulating concise ideas." In order to produce this type of officer, Scharnhorst realized education was necessary.

The first step undertaken by Scharnhorst was the creation of the *Militarische Gesellschaft* (Military Society), a society whose purpose it "was to instruct its members through the exchange of ideas in all areas of the art of war in a manner that would encourage them to seek out the truth." While its overt goal was the study of war, the society saw military scholarship as a means of fostering *Bildung*. The activities of the society included the presentation of papers, essay competitions, answering questions posed by the membership, book reviews, historical seminars, and the publication of a society periodical. As a result of these various activities the society became the focal point of *Bildung* in the Prussian army. White points out that this was exactly what Scharnhorst wanted because "*Bildung* meant not just an education or culture, but also being part of the community."

Scharnhorst's ideas and efforts of 1802-05 set the stage for future reforms. During this time period he was only able to influence a small, but dedicated, group of officers. Unfortunately

for Prussia, he failed to make a profound impact on the army as a whole until after the battle of Jena-Auerstadt in 1806. In this battle, Napoleon proved to the Prussians how outdated their military system was. White points out that "Jena was more than a military disaster; it was a terrible indictment against the social, political, and military system of the past." Armed with this lesson and the blessing of the King of Prussia, Scharnhorst and his reformers were able to transform the anachronistic Prussian army into a modern nation-in-arms capable of defeating one of the world's greatest military minds. The end result of Scharnhorst's efforts was the creation of a professional officer corps.

White has produced a case study of military reform that emphasizes education as the means to an end. The timing of this book's publication coincided with Marine efforts at reform. Our Commandant has instituted a professional military education program focusing on professional reading and Basic Warrior Training focusing on the basic skills an individual will need in order to survive on today's battlefield. He has established a Marine Corps University and a Warfighting Center that focuses on concepts and doctrine. He has challenged the leadership of the Corps to prepare itself mentally for the battlefields of tomorrow while ensuring that Marine riflemen are ready to carry out their mission. Scharnhorst has shown us how we can mentally prepare ourselves for future battlefields. He once stated that "war itself only educates that group of soldiers who have prepared themselves for it and have cultivated their intellect."

"Am I preparing myself?" is the question all Marines must ask themselves.

The Enlightened Soldier is highly recommended for the professional Marine who takes his education seriously. Mr. White's book is written in a style that the serious student of military history will find refreshing and informative while still managing to keep other readers' attention. This book fills a void in the academic field of military history. It explains the beginnings of the Western model of the professional soldier and makes many key points to spur the thoughts of today's military professional.



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