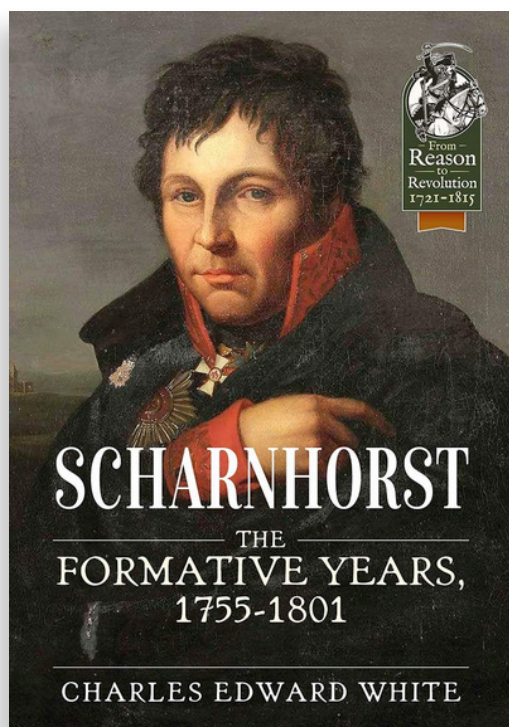


CHARLES EDWARD WHITE,
Scharnhorst: The Formative Years,
1755-1801

Warwick, Helion, 2021, 436pp, £37.50



Given the vast literature on Carl von Clausewitz, it seems extraordinary there is no biography in English of his mentor, Gerhard von Scharnhorst, ‘the father and friend of my spirit’. Previously, the only monograph was Dr White’s own *The Enlightened Soldier: Scharnhorst and the Militärische Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801-1806* (New York: Praeger, 1989). Now, the former Command Historian for the United States Armed Forces Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, is devoting his retirement to filling that gap. This volume

is the first of two: the second (currently in preparation) will cover Scharnhorst's experiences in Prussia, from his transfer from Hanoverian service in 1801 to his untimely death in 1813.

White makes clear from the start his belief that the key to understanding Scharnhorst is the concept of *Bildung*:

Scharnhorst regarded the process of *Bildung* as central to the professional growth of the military leader. [...] For Scharnhorst, *Bildung* was the mental fitness that empowered the military leader. It enabled him to assimilate knowledge from a variety of sources and then to synthesise and fashion that data into an appropriate response to the challenge at hand. It was a recurrent process rather than mere training to accomplish a certain skill. [...] History would provide the soldier with the vicarious combat experience he could not obtain in peacetime, an understanding that would prepare him for success in war (x-xi).

Scharnhorst began his military service in 1773. Over the following 20 years, he underwent a personal *Bildung*. Central to that process, White makes clear, was a series of mentors. First, Reichsgraf Wilhelm zu Schaumburg-Lippe, ruler of that tiny corner of Germany where Scharnhorst had been born. 'One of the few

enlightened rulers in Europe at that time' (25), Wilhelm modernised his 130-square-mile county, developing its industry, promoting commerce, improving housing and education, attracting scholars, scientists and artists, and winning the admira-

THE ENLIGHTENED SOLDIER

*Scharnhorst and the Militärische
Gesellschaft in Berlin, 1801-1805*

Charles Edward White

tion of Goethe and Mendelssohn (31-32). The young Scharnhorst benefitted from the *Bildung* developed by Wilhelm for his minuscule army. This ranged extensively across science, technology, engineering and mathematics, based on his belief that, 'Experience without military insight is more harmful than useful. Such stupidity makes one obstinate and prideful' (52-53). Passing top of his class in 1777, Scharnhorst joined the Hanoverian Army as an officer candidate. His new commander, *General-Major* Emmerich von Estorff, shared Wilhelm's emphasis on *Bildung* of his officers. Scharnhorst flourished and, within a year, was appointed chief instructor at the regimental school. Encouraging Scharnhorst's thirst for

learning, Estorff supported him to attend lectures at the nearby University of Göttingen. There, he was exposed to debates about the potential for a free and open society, based on modernisation of the absolutist state. By 1782, Scharnhorst had gained such a reputation that *Oberstleutnant* Victor von Trew, commandant of Hanover's new artillery school, selected him to join his staff as an instructor. There, Scharnhorst began to publish *Military Library*, which surveyed military literature. It rapidly became the most widely read military journal in Europe. In its pages, Scharnhorst set out his vision: 'Ignorance humiliates and dishonours the military [whereas] the *Bildung* of officers refines the military little by little' (91). Despite his growing reputation, however, Scharnhorst came to realise that Trew regarded him as simply an educator, with no prospect of field command or promotion.

Scharnhorst's prospects were transformed by the outbreak of hostilities between Britain (and hence Hanover) and France in 1793. His first major test came at Hondschoote, on 8 September: halting the routing Hanoverian infantry, he organised a rearguard that prevented disaster. Yet Trew credited his own nephew for these actions, even though the commander of the Hanoverian forces, *General der Cavallerie* Johann von Wallmoden, had himself witnessed events. Scharnhorst's disillusion with noble officers increased, as he realised few showed any real interest in the welfare of their men, but instead wasted lives needlessly and displayed minimal initiative. Scharnhorst's expression of these criticisms won him few friends, but his obvious ability gained Wallmoden's confidence, resulting in promotion to *Major* and appointment as his 'Second Aide' (essentially chief of staff) in July 1794. This allowed Scharnhorst to develop the concept of the *Truppengeneralstab* (General Staff with the Troops), who would assist the commanding general deploy his troops, develop plans, and advise the field commanders – 'in no other army of the time did anyone other than *Major* Gerhard Scharnhorst conceive of such a command-and-control model' (209).

Scharnhorst continued to serve with the Army of Observation from March 1795, as British and German forces withdrew from Flanders and took up defensive positions to prevent French incursions. He displayed a restless energy, constantly assessing possible French offensives and outlining the most effective responses to these, preparing plans for spoiling attacks, and drafting reference guides for staff officers. Central to his approach was his rejection of the widespread belief that leaders did not need specialised education and training. Scharnhorst argued

that, without *Bildung*, ‘mechanical thinkers [...] restrict[...] the intellect more and more, and finally turn[...] scholarship into a drill’ (266-267). Instead, he began to consider warfare from a completely novel perspective:

The psychological part of the art of war is a field that is not at all well understood [...] We owe this inconceivably to the fact that the principal benefit of history: the difficult and yet so useful knowledge of the human heart, which is obtained most readily by the study of events resulting from vast and far-reaching designs, is almost completely lost (331).

Wallmoden’s appreciation of his subordinate was demonstrated in June 1796, when he secured his appointment as General-Quartermaster-Lieutenant of the Hanoverian Observation Corps, which made him the most senior general staff officer in the entire Hanoverian Army. Yet this disillusioned Scharnhorst still further, as the commander-in-chief, *Feldmarshall* Heinrich von Freytag, conspired to assign the salary for the post to one of his own favourites and blocked Scharnhorst’s promotion prospects. Yet, despite these affronts, Scharnhorst at first declined Prussian overtures to enter their service, even though offered promotion, elevation to the nobility, and the opportunity to apply his ideas. In the end, continued slights by the Hanoverian nobility meant that he was driven to accept the repeated offer in 1801. As White notes, ‘It is difficult to believe that Hanover refused to appreciate the enlightened soldier Scharnhorst was, but a social pattern devised to meet only the needs of the high-born estate simply could not be altered without traumatic repercussions’ (386).

This book represents a superb piece of scholarship. White has delved deep into the original records and displays an excellent grasp of the wider literature. His text is well written and clear, engaging both intellect and heart, as he describes the repeated humiliations Scharnhorst suffered from his reactionary social superiors. The campaigns are illustrated with a dozen maps, and the text is supported by copious footnotes and an extensive bibliography, though numerous typos suggest a need for firmer editing. White has made a substantial contribution to our understanding of Scharnhorst, both as a military thinker and as a gifted commoner seeking advancement in a fossilised social hierarchy. Highly recommended to anyone interested in the causes of French revolutionary success against the armies of the *Ancien Regime*, the origins of the general staff, or the roots of Clausewitz’s thinking. The second volume in the series, covering Scharnhorst’s service in Prussia, must accordingly be awaited with eager anticipation.

MARTIN SAMUELS