



ZORNDORF 1758: PRUSSIAN WAR-MAKING AT THE MID-POINT OF THE SEVEN YEARS' WAR¹

Adam Storrington

The year 1758 marked a hinge point in the Seven Years' War. It was the last point when Prussia held the initiative, and could contemplate offensive campaigns to conquer a peace. Despite his setbacks in early 1757, Frederick the Great's remarkable victories at Rossbach and Leuthen later in the year had completely recovered the initiative. In the first two campaigns of 1758, Frederick would try first to launch a renewed offensive into Austrian territory and then to deal a decisive defeat to the Russians. His failure to achieve either of these objectives conceded the initiative back to his enemies, who would reduce him to an increasingly defensive position as the war continued.² This paper will examine how the Prussian army operated at this transitional point not just of this war but of the art of war in general. Developments in technology, and in military thought, made the Seven Years' War a crucial stage in the evolution from what is called eighteenth-century warfare to what is called revolutionary or Napoleonic warfare, and Frederick's battle against the Russians at Zorndorf in August 1758 saw the appearance of important innovations in the Prussian art of war, which showed the way for future practice in the Napoleonic Wars and beyond.³

In 1758, as in the two previous years of the war, Frederick's plan in the face of his converging enemies was to strike the closest, the Austrians, first, seeking a decisive success before the others could arrive. His target this time was the key communications and supply hub of Olmütz in Moravia. While a full analysis of the Olmütz campaign is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper, it can be seen as essentially a repetition of the king's invasion of Bohemia the previous year, which failed for the same reasons: the structural limitations of eighteenth-century war-making. Unable to advance more than a hundred miles from their supply bases, the Prussians found themselves forced to besiege the first big fortified city which lay in their path: Prague in 1757, Olmütz in 1758.⁴ Tied down maintaining the siege, elements of their divided forces were exposed to defeat by the Austrians – at Kolin in 1757, and Domstadt in 1758 – and they were ultimately forced to retreat. It was a demonstration of

¹ This paper draws on my MPhil research at the University of Cambridge. I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for funding this research, and to Professor Tim Blanning and Professor Christopher Clark for their help and guidance during the project. I am also grateful to Professor Stephen Badsey and Mr. Frank Baldwin for their helpful comments on the oral version of this paper. An expanded version of the MPhil dissertation, providing a detailed account of the Zorndorf campaign, will be published in book form by Helion & Co.

² Szabo, Franz A. J., *The Seven Years War in Europe 1756-1763* (Harlow, 2008), p.202; Kunisch, Johannes, *Friedrich der Grosse: der König und seine Zeit* (München, 2004), pp.400-401.

³ For comments on the continuity between eighteenth-century and revolutionary warfare, see Black, Jeremy, *Warfare in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1999), pp.192-195 and Blanning, T.C.W., *The French Revolutionary Wars 1787-1802* (London, 1996), p.17.

⁴ Strachan, Hew, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (London, 1983), p.11 notes this phenomenon in eighteenth-century warfare.



the limitations on offensive action affecting all participants in the war, which even the virtuosity of the King of Prussia could not quite overcome.

While the king took the offensive against the Austrians, he left the army of his subordinate, Lieutenant-General Count Christoph zu Dohna, to cover Pomerania and Brandenburg against the Russians and Swedes. Frederick's letters to Dohna during the campaign leading up to Zorndorf are interesting for the light they shed on the king's approach to command, and the role that he felt his subordinates needed to play in the Prussian war machine. On 2nd April 1758, Frederick wrote to Dohna giving him his instructions for the coming campaign.

I have given you the command of my army of Prussia, because I have confidence in your abilities that you will acquit yourself well. For this reason, I forbid you on pain of death to hold councils of war – which result only in cowardly decisions – but [urge you] to have the same confidence in yourself which I believe has been so well placed there. You must have the same authority in your army as I would exercise if I were there. There are Lieutenant Generals who have, in truth, the same rank as yourself, but the command of the army makes a distinction between yourself and the others...

You are elevated by our discipline, so that I do not need to recommend that you maintain it vigorously, along with subordination....

Do not rely, during the campaign, on orders that you may receive from me, since the nature of my operations will sever all connection between us and you will be obliged to operate on your own initiative.... For these reasons, I consider it appropriate to give you a general picture of our affairs and detail to you the bulk of our problems, leaving, for the rest, the detailed execution of what you do to your wisdom and penetration.⁵

Two key themes are notable in this letter. Firstly, the king needed his detached commander to act independently. He repeated this message on 10th May, telling Dohna that 'you should act... exactly as you judge appropriate and necessary'. In contrast to the Austrians, Russians and French, where the courts directed the operations of the field armies, Frederick not only himself enjoyed the advantage of being both head of state and commander-in-chief – in control of the whole state machinery – but sought to extend this advantage to Dohna by encouraging him to act on his own initiative.⁶ Indeed, the philosophy of command which

⁵ *Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Grossen*, Bd.XVI (Berlin, 1888), pp.346-347 No. 9887. 'Je vous ai donné le commandement de mon armée de Prusse, parce que j'ai la confiance en votre mérite que vous vous en acquitterez bien. Par cette raison, je vous défends sous peine de la vie, de tenir conseil de guerre – dont il ne résulte que des parties lâches – mais d'avoir en vous la même confiance que je crois y avoir bien placée. Il faut que vous vous donniez dans votre armée la même autorité que j'y exercerais, si j'y étais. Il y a des lieutenants-généraux qui, à la vérité, ont le même grade, que vous, mais le commandement de l'armée fait l'intervalle de vous aux autres... Vous êtes élevé dans notre discipline, ainsi je ne dois pas vous recommander de la maintenir en vigueur, ainsi que la subordination.... Ne vous fiez pas, durant la campagne, aux ordres que vous pourriez recevoir de moi, à cause que la nature de mes opérations nous ôtera tout connexion, et que vous serez obligé d'agir de tête.... Par ces raisons, je trouve à propos de vous faire un tableau en général de nos affaires et de vous détailler le gros de votre besogne, abandonnant, au reste, à votre sagesse et à votre pénétration le détail de l'exécution de ce que vous aurez faire.' All translations from the *Politische Correspondenz* are mine'.

⁶ *Politische Correspondenz Friedrichs des Grossen*, Bd.XVII (Berlin, 1889), pp.11-12, No.9990. 'Vous y agirez tout comme vous le jugerez à propos et nécessaire'. Schieder, Theodor, *Friedrich der Große: ein*



Frederick laid out in this letter is strikingly similar to Prussia's philosophy of government.⁷ The role he outlined for Dohna was essentially that of the general as enlightened despot, with the army completely subordinate to its commander and the latter using his reason to make intelligent use of that subordination.⁸

Secondly, this letter, and others that Frederick would send to Dohna over the following months, showed the king's desperate need for subordinates who could out-general their opponents. Habitually out-numbered, the Prussians depended on superior quality, both of soldiers and commanders, to overcome the superior quantity of their enemies. If the king was not able to be present to provide this in person, he sought various means to coach, instruct or drive his detached subordinates into doing it for themselves. In the pre-war *Instruction militaire du Roi de Prusse pour ses généraux*, Frederick provided detailed case studies of how to operate in particular situations, hoping that his commanders would understand the principles behind them and apply them in the field.⁹ On 2nd April, Frederick plied Dohna with specific advice as to when and how he could best attack the Russians: he should strike them while they were on the march or just before they made camp, before they had had time to entrench themselves and sight their batteries. He should make the attack with one wing only, using the habitual Prussian oblique line formation, and should support the attacking troops with concentrated cannon fire.¹⁰ Later in the campaign, as the Russians approached the Oder river, Frederick abandoned the intricacies of tactics and simply urged Dohna, in letters on 24th July and 1st August, 'to advance vigorously and try to hit [the enemy] good and hard'.¹¹ Frederick had said that Prussia's wars needed to be 'short and lively': he needed his generals to seek battle to deliver the decisive victories that Prussia needed, and he did everything he could to teach them how to win these battles.¹²

The same principles – of giving initiative to subordinates and at the same time trying to teach them how to use that initiative as effectively as would the king himself – can be seen in Frederick's correspondence with his other detached commanders during this period. On 19th July, when giving instructions to Prince Henry, left in command in Saxony, he stated that 'I prescribe you nothing but to have an eye that nothing considerable penetrates via Lusatia, and to profit from every occasion, in general or in detail, to do all the harm that you can to the

Königtum der Widersprüche (Frankfurt am Main, 1983), pp.185-186 is a particularly good description of Frederick's role as head of state and Commander-in-Chief.

⁷ I am indebted to Professor Christopher Clark for pointing this out to me. Personal Communication, 9th March 2007.

⁸ See Luvaas, Jay (ed. and trans.), *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (New York, 1999), p.77 for Frederick's statement on the importance of subordination to commanders.

⁹ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, pp.176-192.

¹⁰ *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd XVI, p.347, No.9887.

¹¹ *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, p.136, No. 10171. 'Mit vigeur auf den Hals zu gehen und zu suchen, ihn [den Feind] recht tüchtig zu schlagen'. *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, p.143, No. 10181. '...sie recht tüchtig zu schlagen'.

¹² Blanning, *French Revolutionary Wars*, p.11.



enemy, according as you judge it appropriate'.¹³ While Prince Henry's formidable abilities meant that it was safe to 'prescribe him nothing', Frederick gave Margrave Karl of Brandenburg-Schwedt detailed and quite prescriptive instructions when he left him in command in Silesia on marching north to confront the Russians, specifying how he should react in a number of different eventualities. Indeed, the instructions relating to campsites proved to be inappropriate to the situation and had to be ignored.¹⁴ The principle, however, was the same: Frederick needed his subordinates to act on their own initiative without relying on his orders. Prince Henry could be relied on to use this initiative exactly as the king would wish. Other commanders would be plied with instructions, but instructions whose aim was to empower them to act without further recourse to the king. As the enemy closed in, the king sought to imbue them with his own habitual boldness: urging and goading them to attack.¹⁵

The Russian advance across Poland was quite as glacial as Frederick expected. Having reached Thorn and Elbing on the Vistula in early March, supply difficulties meant that the army of General Villim Villimovitch Fermor then took over four months to cross Poland, reaching Posen on 1st July and Landsberg, in eastern Brandenburg, only on 6th August (See Map 1).¹⁶ The Russians decided not to advance to Frankfurt an der Oder, the only place where they could conceivably have effected a junction with the Austrians, and Fermor refused even to cross the Oder River without a specific order from the court.¹⁷ Instead, on 15th August, the Russians began a siege of the Prussian fortress of Küstrin, on the eastern bank of the river. Even then they proved ineffectual, since their siege train had been left behind. While Russian howitzers burned almost all the houses of Küstrin to the ground, their artillery was unable to make any impression on the fortress walls.¹⁸ Seeking only to hold the Oder line, Fermor

¹³ *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, p.118 No. 10148. 'Je ne vous prescriis rien que d'avoir l'oeil que rien de considerable ne pénétre par Lusace, et de profiter de toutes les occasions de faire en gros ou en detail tout le mal que vous pourrez aux ennemis, selon que vous le jugerez à propos'.

¹⁴ *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, pp.160-163, No.10199; Gaudi, Friedrich Wilhelm Ernst Freiherr von, *Journal vom Siebenjährigen Kriege*, Bd. V, 1758 (Buchholz, 2003), p.216.

¹⁵ For an example of similar treatment of Ferdinand of Brunswick in 1759, see Szabo, *The Seven Years' War*, p.257.

¹⁶ Bangert, Dieter Ernst, *Die russisch-österreichische militärische Zusammenarbeit im Siebenjährigen Kriege in den Jahren 1758-1759*, (Boppard am Rhein, 1971), pp.51-52, 84-85, 98-99; Tielke, J.G., *An Account of some of the most Remarkable Events of the War between the Prussians, Austrians and Russians from 1756 to 1763: and a Treatise on several branches of the Military Art with plans and maps*, Vol. II, C. Crawford and R. Crawford (trans), (2nd edn. London, 1788), pp. 47-55, 63, 70-71, 83-84, 109.

¹⁷ Bangert, *Militärische Zusammenarbeit*, pp.89, 94-97; Duffy, Christopher, *Russia's Military Way to the West: Origins and Nature of Russian Military Power 1700-1800* (London, 1981), p.86; Frisch, Ernst von, *Zur Geschichte der russischen Feldzüge im siebenjährigen Kriege nach der Aufzeichnungen und Beobachtungen der dem russischen Hauptquartier zugetheilten österreichischen Offiziere, vornemlich in den Kriegsjahren 1757-1758* (Heidelberg, 1919), pp.76-79; Immich, Max, *Die Schlacht bei Zorndorf am 25. August 1758* (Berlin, 1893), p.55.

¹⁸ Archenholz, J. W. von, *The History of the Seven Years War in Germany*, F.A. Catty (trans.), Part IV (Frankfurt am Main, 1843), p.161; Duffy, *Russia*, pp.85-86; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.222-227; Großer Generalstab, Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung II, *Die Kriege Friedrichs des Großen, Dritter Teil: der siebenjährige Krieg 1756-1763, Bd. VIII: Zorndorf und Hochkirch* (Berlin, 1910), pp.78-84; Masslowski, Dmitri Theodorovich, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung, II. Theil: Der Feldzug des Grafen Fermor in den östlichen Gebieten von Preussen (1757-1759)*, Drygalski, A. von (trans.), (Berlin, 1891), pp.143-148;



dispatched 11,800 men, under General Rumyantsev, to Schwedt, further north, apparently in the belief that Küstrin and Schwedt were the only places where the Oder could be crossed.¹⁹ The Russian threat, at least in 1758, had proved hollow.

Nevertheless, having failed to take Olmütz, and unable to draw Field Marshal Daun into battle near Königgrätz in Bohemia, Frederick felt obliged to turn north to confront the Russians. Having brought his main army back to Landeshut in Silesia on 10th August, he set off northwards with a picked force of 15,000 men and 40 heavy guns.²⁰ In the twelve days that followed, the Prussian king gave one of his most impressive demonstrations of the strategic skill which he made his own during the Seven Years' War: the art of using interior lines to concentrate force against converging enemies.²¹ Marching mainly in the early mornings to escape the fierce August sun, and often having to travel along roads that were little more than sand beds, the troops from Silesia marched 250km in 12 days – ten days of marching and two of resting – or an average of over 20km a day, to join Dohna's army at Gorgast, across the Oder from Küstrin, on 22nd August.²² In the words of the German General Staff, 'the marching achievements of the troops brought... from Silesia belong to the most glorious annals of Prussian military history'.²³ In less than two weeks, Frederick had swung his strength from one end of the theatre to the other, almost doubling the Prussian forces on the Oder from 22,000 to 37,000, and enabling them to confront the Russian army of 54,000 on something approaching equal terms. The achievement, however, reflected not just the strategic abilities of the king but also the impressive speed with which his army could move when it did not have to contend with supply difficulties. While Clausewitz would later consider 20km a normal day's work, and Napoleon's troops would average 30km a day during the encirclement at Ulm, the achievements of Frederick's men were far from the

Mitchell, Sir Andrew, *Memoirs and Papers of Sir Andrew Mitchell, K.B. Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary from the court of Great Britain to the court of Prussia, from 1756 to 1771*, Vol. I, Andrew Bisset (ed.), (London, 1850), pp.443-444; Retzow, Friedrich August von, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse des Siebenjährigen Krieges in Rücksicht auf Ursachen und Wirkungen von einem Zeitgenossen*, Erster Theil (Berlin, 1802), pp.311-312; Tempelhoff, Georg Friedrich von, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges in Deutschland zwischen dem Könige von Preußen und der Kaiserin Königin mit ihrer Alliierten als eine Fortsetzung der Geschichte des General Lloyd*, Zweiter Theil welcher den Feldzug von 1758 enthält (Berlin, 1785, pp.217-220; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.128-142.

¹⁹ Duffy, *Russia*, p.86; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.85-8; Jany, Curt, *Geschichte der Preußischen Armee von 15. Jahrhundert bis 1914, Bd.II: Die Armee Friedrichs des Grossen 1740-1763* (Osnaburck, 1967), p.486; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, pp.144-151.

²⁰ Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, p.90; Jany, *Geschichte der Preußischen Armee*, p.486

²¹ See, for example, Retzow, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse*, pp.305-306

²² Catt, Henri de, *Vorleser Friedrichs des Großen: die Tagebücher 1758-1760* (München und Berlin, 1986), pp.56-61; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.217-219, 228; Immich, *Schlacht bei Zorndorf*, p.58; Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers of Sir Andrew Mitchell*, Vol. I, pp.423, 425; Vol. II, pp.37-41; Koser, Reinhold, *König Friedrich der Große*, Bd. II (Stuttgart und Berlin, 1903), p.177; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.146-147. These calculations assume that a German Mile measures 7420.54m.

²³ Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, p.112. 'Die Marschleistungen der von ihm [Friedrich] aus Schlesien herangeführten Truppen gehören zu den glänzendsten der preußischen Kriegsgeschichte'.



traditional picture of eighteenth-century armies as capable of only ‘slow, easy and comfortable’ marches.²⁴

Having united his army with Dohna’s, Frederick reconnoitred the Russian position in front of Küstrin to judge the possibilities for a frontal attack. Finding this impossible, he resolved to cross the Oder further north. If the march up from Silesia had demonstrated Frederick’s skill in using interior lines, the following three days would show a capacity to out-manoeuve his enemies comprehensively at the operational level. Both phases were only possible because of the impressive capacities of his troops both for hard marching and complex manoeuvring, including in face of the enemy. Although his exhausted infantry from Silesia had arrived at Gorgast only at 7am on the 22nd, Frederick put the vanguard of the combined army in motion at 10 o’clock that evening toward the designated crossing point at Alt-Güstebiese, with the infantry following at 1am and the cavalry at 3am. After marching through the night, and forcing a crossing by boat at dawn, the Prussians laid a pontoon bridge in the morning, over which the main army began to cross at noon on the 23rd. This crossing cut the Russians in two, dividing Rummyantsev’s 11,800 men from Fermor’s 42,500. Although some of the Prussian troops had by now been on their feet for over fourteen hours, Frederick pushed them southward at a cracking pace to take maximum advantage of his surprise. The heat was intense. A dragoon officer recorded that they had to march all day through sand, surrounded by a cloud of dust, while the infantry lieutenant Prittwitz recalled that some men and animals died from the heat, and the axles of the gun carriages began to burn. The troops had no provisions other than the bread they carried with them, and there was no fodder for the horses. The only water came from pools along the way, and he estimated that fully a third of the army collapsed from heat and exhaustion along the way. When the army finally made camp at around 6pm, with the troops having been marching for between 15 and 20 hours, Prittwitz records that they simply lay down on the grass and went to sleep, in spite of their raging hunger and thirst.²⁵ The British envoy Andrew Mitchell, accompanying Frederick, was amazed: ‘I cannot reckon this march less than 25 English miles. The whole army was excessively fatigued’.²⁶ He was scarcely less exhausted himself, ‘having been almost 20 hours a horseback’.²⁷ What is particularly significant about this march is that the Prussians were evidently willing to let large numbers of men drop out of the ranks without apparently worrying about them deserting. This stands in stark contrast to the typical picture of the

²⁴ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret (eds. and trans.) (London, 1983), p.382, Chandler, David G., *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (London, 1966), p.391, Childs, John, *Armies and Warfare in Europe, 1648 – 1789* (Manchester, 1982), p.115 (although Childs specifically notes the march to Zorndorf as an exception to this statement).

²⁵ Catt, Henri de, *Frederick the Great: the memoirs of his reader Henri de Catt (1758-1760)*, F.S. Flint (trans.) Vol. I (London, 1916), pp.282-283; Catt, *Die Tagebücher*, pp.61-62; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.228-229; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.97-100; Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. I, pp.425-426, Vol. II, p.41; *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd.XVII, p.178 No.10220; Prittwitz und Gaffron, Christian Wilhelm von, *Unter der Fahne des Herzogs von Bevern* (Breslau, 1935), pp.212-14; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, pp.220-2; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.148, 153-5.

²⁶ Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. I, p.426.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. II, p.41.



Frederickian army as a moving prison, forced to move slowly to prevent its pressed soldiers from deserting.²⁸

After giving his troops the morning to recover, Frederick set his army in motion once again on the afternoon of the 24th. Learning of the Prussian crossing during the afternoon of 23rd August, Fermor had abandoned the siege of Küstrin and marched his army overnight to take up a position facing northwards along the swampy river Mietzel (See Figure 1). To secure their position, the Russians destroyed the bridges across the Mietzel at Quartshen and Kutzdorf (See Map 2).²⁹ Arriving in late afternoon, Frederick reconnoitred the Russian position and decided to outflank it to the east. Having captured intact bridges at Neudamm Mühle and Kersten on the evening of the 24th, he roused his tired soldiers at 3.30am on 25th August and had them cross the Mietzel and march in battle order around the Russian position. Debouching from the woods at 8am, the Prussian king had the opportunity to fall on the scarcely protected Russian baggage train to the east, or to attack the Russians' eastern flank, but chose to do neither. Clearly he was determined to defeat his enemies in battle, rather than simply forcing them to withdraw for lack of supplies, and the boggy ground east of the Russian position was unsuitable for the movement of large numbers of troops. He kept his army marching first southwards and then westwards to reach the village of Zorndorf at 9am, where it turned north to face the enemy.³⁰

Although they were aware of the Prussian manoeuvre, the Russians were unable to do anything significant to counter it. As the Prussians marched around them, the Russians were able only to counter-march to face southwards, the new direction of attack, while their Cossacks skirmished ineffectually with the Prussian hussars.³¹ When the Prussian manoeuvre

²⁸ For arguments that the Prussian army was forced to move slowly to prevent desertion, see: Kunisch, Johannes, *Das Mirakel des Hauses Brandenburg: Studien zum Verhältnis von Kabinettspolitik und Kriegführung im Zeitalter des Siebenjährigen Krieges* (München, 1978), p.59; Kunisch, Johannes, *Fürst – Gesellschaft – Krieg: Studien zur bellizistischen Disposition des absoluten Fürstenstaates* (Köln, 1992), pp.94-5; Schieder, Friedrich der Große, p.193.

²⁹ Bangert, *Die russisch-österreichische militärische Zusammenarbeit*, pp.101-102; Etzel, F.A. von, *Die Operationen gegen die Russen und Schweden im Jahre 1758 und die zweitägige Schlacht bei Zorndorf am 25. und 26. August* (Berlin, 1858), pp.154-155, 170; *Posthumous Works of Frederic II, King of Prussia, Vol. II: The History of the Seven Years' War*, Part I, Thomas Holcroft (trans.) (London, 1789), p.265; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, p.230; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.103-4; Hartmann, Stefan, 'Eine unbekannt Quelle zur Schlacht bei Zorndorf', in *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* XXXV (1985), pp.176-177, 186-187; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, pp.153-156, 160-163; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, p.222; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.156-157.

³⁰ Catt, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, pp. 284-285, 290-291; Etzel, *Operationen gegen die Russen und Schweden*, pp.156, 168; *Frederic II, History of the Seven Years' War*, p.266; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.230-232; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.101, 123-124; Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. I, pp.426-8; Vol. II, pp.41-3; *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, pp.185-6, No.10232; Prittwitz, *Unter der Fahne des Herzogs von Bevern*, pp.215-216; Retzow, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse*, p.315; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, pp.222-224; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.158, 165, 171-172.

³¹ Etzel, *Operationen gegen die Russen und Schweden*, pp. 155-156; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, p.231; Hartmann, 'Unbekannte Quelle', p.177; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, pp.162-169; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, p.223-224; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.164-166, 174.



was completed the Russians were reduced to a disastrous position. In three days, Frederick had outflanked them not once but twice, cutting their army in two and finally executing a march 180 degrees around their position to leave them trapped within their own defences. There could be no retreat across the Mietzel, as they themselves had destroyed the bridges, and their troops were packed together in a congested position, penned within the deep ravines that scored the landscape, with the Prussian artillery able to shoot down on them from the higher ground around Zorndorf (See Figure 2). The spectre of another Rossbach loomed. Although the Prussians now had to make a frontal attack, defeat for the Russians would mean annihilation, and perhaps the end of their involvement in the central theatre of war.³²

The organisation of Frederick's attack, as he attempted to convert his advantageous position into a decisive success, is worthy of some examination, as it reveals much about the development of Prussian tactics at this mid-point in the Seven Years' War. The Prussian plan was to employ their habitual oblique line formation, concentrating overwhelming force at one point to turn overall inferiority in numbers into local superiority. While the infantry deployment followed standard Prussian practice, however, the employment of the artillery and cavalry was radically new, and showed the way Prussian tactics were changing to respond to new technological developments. The Seven Years' War was the first war in which artillery played an important role, as improvements in gun founding in the mid-eighteenth century had made guns lighter, more reliable and more accurate.³³ The Prussian army had started the war with a doctrine that stressed speed of attack and discouraged firing, but the heavy casualties suffered in the early battles led Frederick to change tactics, and recognise the importance of firepower.³⁴ His letters to his generals in the months before Zorndorf consistently pressed them to employ large artillery batteries concentrated at the point of attack.³⁵ In his *Réflexions sur la tactique et sur quelques parties de la guerre, ou, Réflexions sur quelques changements dans la façon de faire la guerre*, written in winter 1758 (a document which highlights the importance of that year in the evolution of Prussian tactical doctrine), Frederick stated that 'to attack the enemy without first having procured the advantage of superior or at least equal fire is the same as trying to fight against armed troops with men carrying only sticks, and that is impossible'.³⁶ In the *Militärische Testament* of

³² Clausewitz, Carl von, *Hinterlassene Werke des Generals Carl von Clausewitz über Krieg und Kriegführung*, Bd. X: *Strategische Beleuchtung mehrerer Feldzüge von Sobiesky, München, Friedrich dem Großen und dem Herzog Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand von Braunschweig und andere historische Materialien zur Strategie* (Berlin, 1837), p.89; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, p.127; Retzow, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse*, p.315.

Kunisch, *Das Mirakel des Hauses Brandenburg*, p.58 notes that, in 1759, justifying their unwillingness to cross the Oder, the Russian generals explained that the army represented the core of their strength, and its loss would be a disaster for the Russian state.

³³ Hughes, B.P., *Firepower: Weapons Effectiveness on the Battlefield, 1630-1850* (London, 1974), p.94; Parker, Geoffrey, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (2nd edn. Cambridge, 2001), p.151.

³⁴ Showalter, Dennis E. *The Wars of Frederick the Great* (New York, 1996), pp. 34-35, 141, 154-155, 162-163, Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, pp.144, 147, 227, 238-239.

³⁵ *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, pp.84-85, 122, Nos. 10103, 10152.

³⁶ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, p.269.



1768, he went further: ‘now... artillery decides everything’.³⁷ In preparing for his march northwards, he ordered that Dohna be supplied with additional heavy artillery from Berlin, and himself brought along a large train from Silesia.³⁸ ‘Even in these long marches’, reported Mitchell, ‘we carry with us 26 pieces of battery cannon, besides the field pieces of the battalions’.³⁹ Indeed, one of the greatest achievements of the Prussian army in this campaign was simply transporting these heavy guns through all their long marches and difficult manoeuvres. At Zorndorf, sixty heavy guns, ‘an unheard-of number for this era’, were concentrated against the Russian right.⁴⁰ The Prussian attack would be preceded by perhaps the heaviest artillery bombardment yet seen on a European battlefield.

Also unusual at Zorndorf was the role given to the cavalry. While their deployment was traditional – with most placed on the flanks, and a reserve of three dragoon regiments behind the left flank – their role was startlingly new. The deep Zabern Grund ravine, covering the Russian right flank, meant that, on the Prussian left, the troopers of General Friedrich Wilhelm von Seydlitz had no enemy cavalry to face, as their Russian opposite numbers were behind their own infantry on the other side of the Grund (See Figure 3). The task Frederick gave them was therefore strictly one of supporting the infantry attack, and moreover he ordered them to stay back, out of artillery range, until the infantry had broken through, and only then pour into the gap they had created.⁴¹ Once again, the king’s writings show that this was not just a reaction to circumstances but a deliberate change in tactical doctrine. The 1759 *Instruction pour les généraux-majors de Cavalerie* specified that, ‘in infantry battles... you should have the cavalry operate not by the wing but preferably through intervals [of infantry]. This is why the cavalry is usually arrayed in the third line and can operate only after the infantry has made a gap at one place or another’.⁴² His 1758 *Réflexions sur quelques changements dans la façon de faire la guerre* advised, ‘do not expose the mounted arm to the fire of either small arms or artillery, which robs it of its best ardour. Reserve the cavalry for the time when it can perform the greatest service – to save the battle or pursue the enemy’.⁴³ As this statement makes clear, the new withdrawn deployment, like the slower, more methodical form of delivering attacks, was a response to the technological change represented by the rise of artillery. Zorndorf was the first battle where it was employed, and therefore the first time when cavalry were used not simply to fight other cavalry in a separate battle on the flanks, perhaps turning to attack the infantry afterwards if they won, but as an integrated element operating in combination with other arms: a tool for exploitation of victory. Clausewitz recognised this development, although he attributed it to a purely tactical, not a

³⁷ Ibid, p.76.

³⁸ *Politische Correspondenz*, Bd. XVII, p.142, No.10180; Gaudi, p.214.

³⁹ Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. I, p.424.

⁴⁰ Quotation is from Showalter, *Wars of Frederick the Great*, p.214. Catt, *Memoirs*, p.292; Duffy, Christopher, *Frederick the Great: a Military Life* (London, 1985), p.165; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, p.232; Tielke, J.G., *War between the Prussians, Austrians and Russians*, pp.177-179.

⁴¹ Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, p.232.

⁴² Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, p.150.

⁴³ Ibid, p.266.



technological, change, and pointed to Kunersdorf as the first battle when both sides placed their cavalry behind their infantry.⁴⁴ The existing historiography on Zorndorf has noted the positioning of the cavalry but has not recognised its significance. If the first use of cavalry as a tool of exploitation is set alongside the largest artillery batteries yet used to prepare an attack, Zorndorf can claim to be the first battle to see that successive, co-ordinated use of artillery, infantry and cavalry that would become standard during the Napoleonic Wars.

If the plan was innovative, the execution was not. The two-hour Prussian artillery bombardment caused heavy casualties, particularly since the Russian artillery, although plentiful, was not as concentrated as the Prussians.⁴⁵ When the Prussian infantry attacked, the artillery, in another impressive feat of mobility, advanced alongside them to provide support with canister fire at close range. The Prussian left flank, however, rather than supporting the advance guard in its attack against the extreme Russian right – the designated point of attack – swung to the right, and attacked alongside the advance guard, striking the almost undamaged Russian centre, which had escaped most of the preliminary bombardment (See Figure 4). The reason for his error, the decisive point in the battle, has been variously debated, and it has been suggested that the commander of the left wing, Major General Hans Wilhelm von Kanitz, after moving his troops to the right to avoid the burning houses of Zorndorf, became disoriented in the smoke and dust.⁴⁶ Lieutenant Prittwitz, however, whose regiment was on the left of Kanitz's line, described how he marched not around but through the village, and his evidence shows that Kanitz did not lose his way but rather misunderstood the purpose of his mission.⁴⁷ When questioned the following day, he apparently explained that he had been trying to maintain contact with the right wing, which had moved further to the right during the advance.⁴⁸ Clearly he did not understand the principles of the oblique line: that strength should be concentrated on one wing while the other was refused. The incident was a demonstration of just how dependent the Prussian system of command was on generals who were able to think for themselves. Kanitz clearly struggled to escape from the mind-set of rigid linear formations, placed parallel to the enemy. This reflected a pattern among many

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp.347-348; Clausewitz, *Hinterlassene Werke*, Bd. X, pp.120-121.

⁴⁵ Duffy, *Frederick the Great*, p.166; Etzel, *Operationen gegen die Russen und Schweden*, pp.156-157, 164; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.131, 461; Hartmann, 'Unbekannte Quelle', p.178; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, pp.169-170; Showalter, *Wars of Frederick the Great*, p.214; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, pp.225-226; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.179-181.

⁴⁶ Catt, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, p.293; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.233-234; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.132, 134; Jany, *Geschichte der Preußischen Armee*, pp.489-491; Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. II, p.43; Preitz, Max, *Prinz Moritz von Dessau im siebenjährigen Kriege* (München und Berlin, 31 October 1912), p.169; Retzow, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse*, p.317; Tempelhof, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, p.226; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, p.182; Waddington, Richard, *La Guerre de Sept Ans: Histoire Diplomatique et Militaire, Tome II: Crefeld et Zorndorf* (Paris, 1899), pp.265-266.

⁴⁷ Prittwitz und Gaffron, *Unter der Fahne des Herzogs von Bevern*, pp.217-218. Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, p.121-122 notes that the houses in the village were widely separated and easy to move through.

⁴⁸ Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, p.249. Immich, *Schlacht bei Zorndorf*, p.137 and Koser, *König Friedrich der Große*, p.180 support this view.



Prussian officers, who were deeply attached to existing conventions of warfare, limiting Frederick's ability to introduce innovations.⁴⁹ Kanitz's error was a demonstration of the great risks associated with the Prussian reliance on intelligent autocracy; risks which would be demonstrated at the highest level after 1786, when the Frederickian state had to maintain its position without its great king.⁵⁰

Kanitz's troops initially made considerable headway against the Russian centre, but at midday, as the Prussian momentum ran out, Fermor ordered the cavalry of his right wing to attack the advance guard's left flank, which had become detached from the Zabern Grund. The Prussians, already tired from their fighting up to that point, broke and fled, and the Russian infantry counter-attacked with the bayonet, throwing Kanitz's troops back in headlong flight as well. The Russian cavalry pursued the fleeing troops, cutting them down by the score, capturing the artillery battery on the left flank and several stands of colours.⁵¹

If Kanitz's error had shown the dangers of a command system that relied on individual initiative, the aftermath demonstrated how effective it could be when implemented by men whose abilities justified the autonomy they were given. The Prussian situation appeared to be critical, but was quickly rescued as the cavalry counter-attacked. There is some dispute as to whether they did so on their own initiative or on orders from Frederick. Certainly the royal *aide-de-camp* Captain von Oppen brought the reserve cavalry an order to charge, but the attack was in fact led by Prince Moritz.⁵² Across the Zabern Grund, it is alleged that Seydlitz initially rejected orders to attack, declaring, 'tell the king that after the battle my head is at his disposal, but meantime I hope he will permit me to exercise it in his service'.⁵³ This story, however, only appeared in 1797, and is not reported by any participant.⁵⁴

Responding to the difficulty of crossing the Zabern Grund, Seydlitz formed his six regiments into three columns, each attacking on a one-squadron frontage. In the *Instruction pour les généraux-majors de Cavalerie*, and in later writings, Frederick praised the attack in column by squadrons as the perfect way to penetrate infantry formations. It had first been used at Rossbach, also by Seydlitz. 'Fortunately nobody yet has cognisance of these column attacks of cavalry', Frederick said in the *Militärische Testament* of 1768: 'the cavalry column is to be

⁴⁹ Kunisch, *Friedrich der Grosse*, pp.435-436.

⁵⁰ Clark, Christopher, *Iron Kingdom: the Rise and Downfall of Prussia, 1600-1947* (London, 2006), p.246 notes the reliance of the Prussian state on having a capable ruler.

⁵¹ Archenholz, *History of the Seven Years War*, pp.164-165; Etzel, *Operationen gegen die Russen und Schweden*, pp.157, 163; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, p.234; Hülsen, Carl Wilhelm von, *Unter Friedrich dem Großen: aus den Memoiren des Aelternvaters 1752-1773* (Berlin, 1890), pp.87-90; Jany, *Geschichte der Preußischen Armee*, p.491; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, p.171; Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. II, p.43; Retzow, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse*, p.317; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, pp.226-227; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, pp.181-184.

⁵² Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, p.227.

⁵³ Showalter, *Wars of Frederick the Great*, p.216.

⁵⁴ Duffy, *Frederick the Great*, p.167; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.470-471; Immich, *Schlacht bei Zorndorf*, p.145.



regarded as a state secret'.⁵⁵ One of Seydlitz's columns struck the Russian cavalry in the flank while Moritz charged them in front; the other two columns hit the disordered Russian infantry. The Russian cavalry was routed and, while the infantry resisted desperately, the Prussian cavalry did terrible execution and the Russians finally broke and fled.⁵⁶ With half the Prussian infantry routed, however, the chance of a decisive victory had gone. The afternoon's fighting was an indecisive killing match, in which the Prussian right narrowly overcame the Russian left through superior training and combined arms support from the cavalry and artillery. Around 6pm the Russians broke and fled, but the Prussians were too exhausted to pursue, and the Russians were able to reform a line once more, now on the western side of the Galgen Grund ravine, running across the centre of the battlefield, and repel Prussian attempts to drive them back as dusk fell.⁵⁷

The battle was one of the bloodiest of the age. The Prussian casualties of 12,800 – 35% of their strength – were the heaviest they would suffer in any of Frederick's battles where they held the field, while the Russian losses of 18,000 – 42% – were even worse.⁵⁸ Neither side had the strength to engage the following day, and on the night of 26th to 27th August Frederick built the Russians a golden bridge, allowing them to slip past him without hindrance and himself racing southwards again to confront Daun, who was advancing in Saxony to threaten Dresden.⁵⁹

Thus, the battle of Zorndorf ended indecisively, with the Russians executing a withdrawal which their supply situation would probably have made inevitable in any case. Frederick had lost the initiative, and would find himself increasingly on the defensive in the coming campaigns. It is worthwhile to remember, however, that it need not have been like this. Frederick's manoeuvres leading up to the battle had reduced the Russians to a desperate position, where defeat would have meant annihilation. Zorndorf was very nearly a decisive victory, and the destruction of Fermor's army would have made it much harder for Russia to return to the Central-European theatre of war the following year. Able to concentrate his

⁵⁵ Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, pp.150, 156. For a discussion of Prussian cavalry attacks in column, see Nosworthy, Brent, *The Anatomy of Victory: Battle Tactics 1689-1763* (New York, 1990), pp.171-173.

⁵⁶ Archenholz, *History of the Seven Years War*, pp.165-166; *Frederic II, History of the Seven Years' War*, p.267; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.234-235; Luvaas, *Frederick the Great on the Art of War*, p.150; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, pp.172-174; Mitchell, *Memoirs and Papers*, Vol. II, p.43; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, pp.226-227; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, p.184-185, Warnéry, Charles Emmanuel de, *Campagnes de Frédéric II, Roi de Prusse de 1756 à 1762* (1788), pp.272-274.

⁵⁷ Etzel, *Operationen gegen die Russen und Schweden*, p.158-160; Gaudi, *Journal 1758*, pp.235-237; Masslowski, *Der siebenjährige Krieg nach russischer Darstellung*, pp.177-180; Retzow, *Charakteristik der wichtigsten Ereignisse*, pp.321-323; Tempelhoff, *Geschichte des Siebenjährigen Krieges*, pp.229-231; Tielke, *War between the Prussians, Austrians, and Russians*, p.188-193.

⁵⁸ Duffy, *Russia*, p.90; Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.484, 10*; Kunisch, *Friedrich der Grosse*, p.391.

⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *Hinterlassene Werke, Bd. X*, p.90 and Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, p.168 both suggest that Frederick built a golden bridge for Fermor. For the events after 25th August, see Großer Generalstab, *Zorndorf und Hochkirch*, pp.154-161, pp. 253-261.



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energies against the Austrians, Frederick might have taken the offensive once more, and ultimately dictated a victor's peace. The indecisive result of Zorndorf therefore represented a tipping point in the war.

The campaign showed both the many strengths of the Prussian army and some of its weaknesses. At the top, the king once again demonstrated his abilities, concentrating his forces adroitly, and manoeuvring his enemies into a position that put him within an ace of decisive success. To make his achievements possible, his troops showed that, when freed from the supply difficulties inherent in operating on enemy territory, they were capable of marching achievements that were comparable even with those of the Napoleonic era, and that they were certainly not restricted by the fear that men who dropped out of ranks would desert. The king worked to enable his generals to display initiative, boldness and independence of thought, though with mixed results. The structures the king created allowed commanders like Prince Moritz and especially Seydlitz to bring their strong abilities to aid the Prussian cause, but the shortage of such men, and the need to rely on generals like Kanitz, who had less understanding of their king's innovative tactics, was a serious limitation on the Prussian war effort, and would weigh ever more heavily as battle casualties steadily took the lives of Frederick's best commanders.

Zorndorf stood at the hinge point of the Seven Years' War in Germany, but it also stood at an important period of change in the military art. Reflecting improvements in gun technology, the Prussians at Zorndorf prepared their attack with bombardment from the largest artillery batteries yet seen on the European battlefield. They had refined the role of the cavalry, and for the first time in European warfare they deployed it behind the infantry, charged not with fighting other cavalry but with exploiting the success of the infantry attack. Seydlitz's horsemen thus prefigured those later of Murat, and can claim to be the first true reserve cavalry, used as a tool for exploitation of victory.

Adam Storing

Department for Education⁶⁰

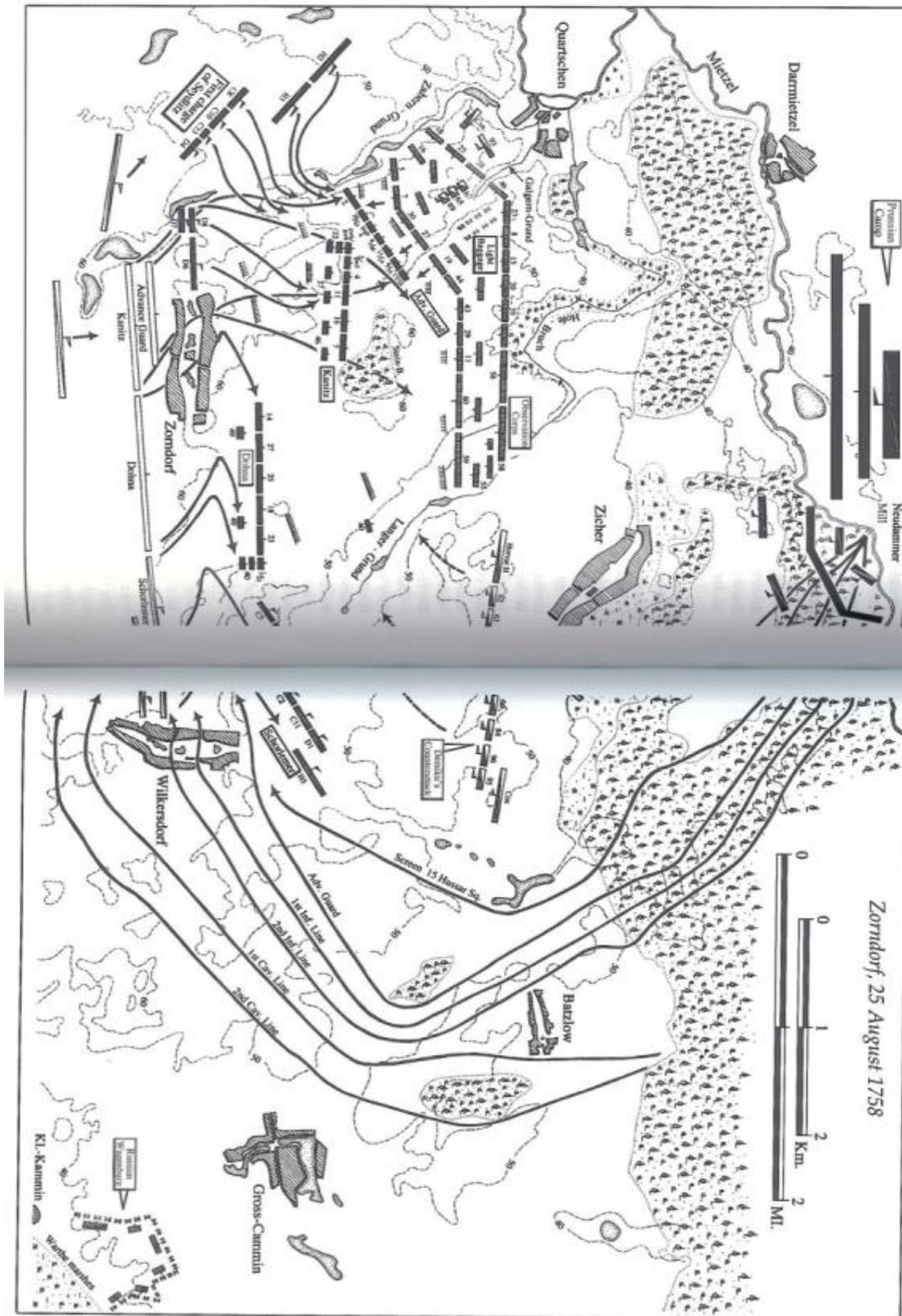
⁶⁰ The views expressed here are the author's own. This work was undertaken independently of my professional work at the Department for Education, and the views expressed should not be taken to reflect those of the Department.

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Annex 1: Maps



Map . The Prussian Theatre of War. (From Duffy, Christopher, *The Army of Frederick the Great* (2nd. Edn., Chicago, 1996), p.8. Reproduced by kind permission of the Emperor's Press).



Map The Battle of Zorndorf. (From Duffy, Christopher, *The Army of Frederick the Great* (2nd. Edn., Chicago, 1996), pp.278-279. Reproduced by kind permission of the Emperor's Press).

Annex 2: The Battlefield of Zorndorf



Figure 1. The woods and swamps along the Mietzel, seen looking north from the Russian position.



Figure 2. The ground held by the Russian right flank, looking northwards from the Prussian position. Note the open ground, exposed to Prussian artillery fire. The woods of the Mietzel can be seen in the background.⁶¹

⁶¹ These photographs were taken during a visit to the battlefield on 12th September 2004. I would like to thank Dr. Benjamin Sames for his unstinting contribution as companion and driver during this visit.

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Figure 3. The Zabern Grund, looking northwards from Seydlitz's position. The Prussian infantry advanced along the right-hand side of the Grund, and the cavalry charged across the shot from left to right when counter-attacking against the Russians. The ravine would have been considerably deeper in 1758. The clumps of trees indicate the former site of ponds.



Figure 4. The battleground of the first attack. The Russian front line was just left of shot, and the Prussians

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