

1994

The German High Command at War

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Recommended Citation

Showalter, Dennis (1994) "The German High Command at War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 47 : No. 1 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol47/iss1/14>

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

“Not Strategists, but Technicians of War”

Asprey, Robert B. *The German High Command at War: Hindenburg and Ludendorff Conduct World War I*. New York: William Morrow, 1991. 558pp. \$27

Barnett, Corelli, ed. *Hitler's Generals*. New York: William Morrow, 1991. 497pp. \$14.95

Warlimont, Walter. *Inside Hitler's Headquarters 1939–45*. Navato, Calif.: Presidio, 1991. 658pp. \$35

THE MODERN GERMAN ARMY has generally been analyzed in institutional rather than biographical terms. Whether it is presented as incorporating a unique genius for war or described as reflecting a consistent incapacity to look beyond the dynastic conflicts of an earlier era, the army as an entity remains a preferred subject of study. Where personalities appear, they are used to illustrate larger themes: the “specialist idiocy” of a Schlieffen, the proto-fascism of a Ludendorff, or the operational virtuosity of a Rommel or a Manstein.

A strong case can be made for a reverse approach: interpreting the army in terms of its personalities. From its royal Prussian beginnings the German army was deeply rooted in overlapping cultures of individualism. Few men rise to the top of any armed service simply by following in the footsteps of their immediate predecessors. The assertiveness generally necessary to achieve high rank was reinforced in Germany by a steadily increasing emphasis on honor—a concept associated with the individual as well as the class and the profession to which he belonged. A German officer was expected to stand for the right, in principle and practice, even in the face of his superiors. Excessive suppleness of spine was considered a more serious flaw than excessive thickness of head. Finally, the German army's increasing stress on “mission tactics” demanded a corresponding emphasis on initiative at all levels of command. Looking over one's shoulder for

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orders was more likely to guarantee early retirement than assure professional success.

Robert Asprey goes so far as to take a biographical approach to the collapse of the Second Reich. Instead of concentrating on the Empire's structural weaknesses, Asprey interprets its downfall as the result of "expanded military egos unchecked by civil authority." The principal "egos" belonged to Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff. "The Duo," as Asprey refers to them, made their reputations in 1914 with the victory of Tannenberg. In the next four years a combination of self-promotion and ruthless intrigue brought them to the summit of power in Germany. Hindenburg and Ludendorff made and broke chancellors, reduced Kaiser Wilhelm to a figurehead, and rendered farcical even the limited parliamentary elements of Germany's constitution. They also led their country to destruction—by a stubborn, irrational insistence on waging total war for total victory. Rejecting any concept of negotiations, "the Duo" exhausted Germany's resources, physical and spiritual, until the eviscerated Imperial system collapsed in November 1918.

Asprey's thesis is defensible, if hardly original; where he falls short is in his presentation. He works from an extremely thin source base. He relies heavily on published diaries and memoirs but takes an essentially uncritical approach to their contents. Also, he derives too many of his lines of argument from a single source, building on that one work and repeating citations to it throughout entire chapters. Finally, his approach lacks subtlety. Asprey paints in primary colors, avoiding nuances that might facilitate understanding of his protagonists. He demonstrates Hindenburg's intellectual shallowness, for example, with extensive quotations from an artist who spent part of 1915 at the Field Marshal's headquarters painting heroic commemorative oils. Repeated accounts of Hindenburg's concern with the accurate spacing of buttons or the proper color of a pair of trousers are meant to show his failure to comprehend the nature of modern war. Paul von Hindenburg was certainly not one of history's great military intellectuals, but what *should* he have discussed with an artist, if not the details of the artist's paintings? Asprey's use of this material makes about as much sense as critiquing General Eisenhower's military competence through the memoirs of his wartime chauffeur.

Similar negative oversimplifications emerge in Asprey's treatment of Ludendorff, the Kaiser, Theobald von Bethman Hollweg, and virtually everyone else who wielded power in Germany before 1918. This reviewer holds no brief for "the Duo" in particular or for Germany's wartime government in general. Yet to attribute that country's military and political decisionmaking almost exclusively to motives of base self-interest or plain stupidity, as does Asprey, is to overlook too many facts and principles that influenced German policy.

A more comprehensive and better-balanced work is Corelli Barnett's paperback anthology, originally published in 1989. The book's twenty chapters discuss twenty-six generals, ranging from headquarters personalities like Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel and Alfred Jodl, chief of the German operations staff and principal adviser to Hitler, to battle captains like Erwin Rommel and Sepp Dietrich. Barnett admits that the selection of subjects was arbitrary, seeking at best to represent the different theaters of war and levels of high command. The contributors include more soldiers, journalists, and popular historians than academicians, and none of the essays is particularly remarkable for original scholarship or argument. On the other hand, the authors generally eschew the fashionable tendency to debunk for the sake of debunking. It is refreshing, for example, to read Martin Blumenson's evaluation of Rommel as "meriting the acclaim accorded him" during the war, Sir Michael Carver's analysis of Field Marshal Fritz Erich von Manstein, and Carlo D'Este's empathetic treatment of Field Marshal Walther Model, which stand out among the competent contributions.

Hitler's generals emerge from Barnett's pages as a significantly more heterogeneous body of men than their World War I predecessors. Some, like Sepp Dietrich and Walther von Reichenau, were heavily influenced by the ideology of National Socialism. Some, like Karl Rudolph Gerd von Rundstedt, were old-line in every way, as dubious about new ways of war as they were suspicious of Adolf Hitler. Some, like Heinz Guderian and Kurt Student, were innovators. Taken as a whole, they were most successful at the tactical and operational levels of their profession. Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin was one of the better corps commanders developed by any army during World War II. Hasso von Manteuffel was a model general of armored forces. Hans-Jürgen von Arnim proved himself a gifted tactician and a humane enemy in the North African campaign. However, at higher levels of responsibility the characterizations are decidedly more ambiguous. Rundstedt, in Earl Ziemke's essay, "seemed to be more than he was" both professionally and morally, and Samuel Mitcham charitably describes Ewald von Kleist as "no genius." At planning levels the picture becomes truly pathetic. Walter Görlitz's portraits of Keitel and Jodl only reinforce the familiar image of military office-boys: attendant lords good for little but to swell a progress and start a scene or two. Franz Halder, Chief of Staff in the critical years from 1938 to 1942, emerges from Barry Leach's essay as a man who preferred observing events to shaping them—like Rundstedt, a living inversion of the traditional General Staff motto, "be more than you seem."

To a significant degree the shortcomings of the Third Reich's generals reflected their complex, ambiguous relationship with Adolf Hitler. Barnett points out that the Nazi regime presented a moral challenge as its criminality

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became obvious to them, while Hitler's personalized and haphazard approach to military planning posed a professional dilemma.

The development of these processes is a major theme of *Inside Hitler's Headquarters*. This is an unrevised reprint of a work first published in English in 1964. Its author, General Walter Warlimont, served from 1939 to 1944 as deputy chief of the Wehrmacht operations staff—a desk job that gave him ample opportunity to observe, from a relatively safe and critical distance, the dynamics of Hitler's exercise of supreme command. His memoirs avoid both the self-exculpation and the overt Führer-bashing common to their genre. Warlimont describes instead the consequences of Hitler's increasing determination to run the war in detail, using his military professionals as an enlarged planning staff with no real command authority. Especially significant in the context of this review is Warlimont's depiction of Hitler's growing moral domination of the soldiers in his immediate entourage. As Hitler's mental, physical, and emotional resources eroded under the immense stress of his assumed burden, keeping the Führer calm and postponing the next destructive temper tantrum became infinitely more important for them than averting the final catastrophe that loomed ahead for anyone with eyes to see.

The generals of the Third Reich were, to a degree, victimized by their own desires. They might be described as initially creating a Hitler in the army's image. The disaster of World War I had clearly shown the consequences of overextending the military's direct authority. When Hitler described the Third Reich as resting on "two pillars," the German army and the Nazi party, the generals responded by assigning him in their own minds the role once exercised by Bismarck. In their world view, such as it was, the Führer would establish the international and domestic matrices of victory. The soldiers would run the war, and, as a by-product, teach the "Bohemian Corporal" his manners. Instead, for the first time in their history, Germany's armed forces performed in the context of a system that was deliberately unlimited in its seeking of enemies and deliberately open-ended in its grand-strategic objectives.

The familiar argument that Hitler's generals were too busy fighting a war to know the true nature of the system they served has a hollow ring. From Ludendorff to Manstein, the works reviewed here offer protagonists who accepted circumstances instead of altering them. At best, the German army's approach to war was more likely to develop skilled field commanders than outstanding grand strategists, but the National Socialist paradigm defied both the mind and the soul of the army's officer corps. Hitler's generals were not weaklings. There were, as suggested earlier, men of strong will who found themselves confronted by something even stronger—an elemental moral force, albeit a negative one. In everyday terms the relationship between Hitler and his generals described in Warlimont's text invites comparison to such classic

domestic comedies as the television series *I Love Lucy* or the long-running comic strip *Bringing Up Father*. In this context, Hitler plays the “feminine” role, regularly overcoming “male rationalism” with emotional intensity. The generals sputter and blow yet ultimately give in, resigning themselves to make the best of things and, in their own minds at least, abrogating final responsibility for an *outcome* already willed by virtue of their participation in the *process*.

The essential difference between the general and the subaltern is that the latter is tested physically, the former morally. Whatever their motivations, Germany’s generals in the twentieth century remained technicians of war—a step or more below the highest levels of military achievement. Might not their self-imposed limitations in the moral sphere have reinforced and reflected their professional shortcomings?

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Corum, James S. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1992. 274pp. \$29.95

In the summer of 1919, the Treaty of Versailles imposed what Germany considered a humiliating peace. In the summer of 1939, Nazi Germany was poised to launch a war of revenge against the victors of 1919. This would not have been an option were it not for the weapon forged by leaders of the German army during the twenty years in between. How they accomplished it is the subject of this work by James Corum, professor of comparative military studies, School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Air University.

Corum correctly states that “the rebuilding of the German Army is one

of the most impressive and significant military accomplishments of the twentieth century.” General von Seeckt, as Chief of the Army Directorate of the postwar German army, the Reichswehr, was responsible between 1920 and 1926 for downsizing the army to meet the constraints of Versailles. This Treaty Army was restricted to 100,000 men (4,000 officers and 96,000 enlisted) in seven infantry and three cavalry divisions.

However, Seeckt (and most leading Germans, civilian as well as military) believed that a larger force was needed for the country’s legitimate defensive needs, a point that Britain and France were willing to concede only in February 1935.

Seeckt’s problem was essentially twofold: (1) rebuild the army from the ruins of war and revolution, and (2)