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The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform

Walter J. Johanson

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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?

Dennis Showalter
U.S. Air Force Academy

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)

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develop it as a cadre for future expansion. Seeckt's first years in command were marked by internal battles such as border conflicts in the East and the French invasion of the Ruhr. Despite these obstacles, however, Seeckt was able to organize and train the force and, despite the limits placed by the Treaty on its weapons, develop an up-to-date tactical doctrine for the army based on the integration of modern arms. By the time of his dismissal in 1926, Seeckt had molded this Treaty Army into what Corum terms "a superb cadre force with which to build a large, modern army."

Corum acknowledges that Seeckt's reform efforts grew out of the German army's experience in World War I. As documented by Timothy Lupfer in *The Dynamics of Doctrine* (1981), the Western Front brought decentralization of combat. The rifle regiment of 1914, under the tactical command of a colonel, had to make the transition into a combined arms force in which the role of platoon and squad leaders was key.

Seeckt required an army with both an immediate crisis-response capability and a force able to be a cadre for expansion. The former mission required an "elite army" (*eliteheer*) and the latter an "army of leaders" (*führerheer*). Although some units should have been charged with one mission and others with the second, Seeckt was forced to burden all units with both missions.

The East, where Seeckt won his fame, was a training ground for

maneuver-warfare operational commanders of the next war, and Corum stresses the "eastern" emphasis in postwar German developments. It was in the West, however, that the German army learned how to fight when maneuver failed and a breakthrough battle needed to be fought. Reichswehr doctrine and organization, in effect, amalgamated the experiences of the two fronts, combining the operations-level lessons of the East with the tactical lessons of the West.

Corum examines the processes by which General von Seeckt was able to turn the weaknesses of the defeated army into advantages. For example, the loss of World War I-generation weapons enabled the Reichswehr to perform detailed analysis of new weapons, build prototypes, and develop doctrine for their use. Also, because 100,000 men were too few to wage war, recruiting technically capable personnel became the rule. They were trained to employ the new systems in combat and to train others in an expanded Reichswehr.

The story of Seeckt's Reichswehr is certainly one of getting the most out of the least: how to build an army of immense potential despite external and internal threats and constraints. Corum helps one to understand how the German army of World War II was able to "fight outnumbered and win."

The book suffers from some irritating flaws, including misidentified officers and a chapter that confuses

operational and organizational doctrine. The main fault of *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, however, is that it leaves one with the impression that Seeckt and his successors overcame the restraints of Versailles. Corum shows how German industry, with Soviet cooperation, did in fact design, build, and test prototypes of armored vehicles and aircraft prohibited by the Treaty. Yet Germany's defeat in 1945 was due in part to the dismantling of her defense industrial base after 1919. Although able to manufacture prototypes, German defense industry never sufficiently recovered its mass production capacity to meet the requirements of the war of 1939–1945.

On the whole, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg* is a valuable addition to the military bookshelf and can be of great interest to force planners. As of 1 September 1939, the 10,000-man Treaty Army of 1920–1933 had grown into an army of over 3.7 million and an air force of 550,000. The *National Military Strategy of the United States* (January 1992) tasks our own forces with immediate and delayed crisis-response capabilities and with a surge of reconstitution capability. How Seeckt built the Reichswehr for potential expansion should be valuable to those planning our own future forces.

WALTER J. JOHANSON
Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve
Yonkers, New York

War. New York: Scribner's, 1992.
452pp. \$30

The Six Day War of 1967 had profound repercussions in the Middle East. For the third time in as many decades, a qualitatively superior, albeit numerically inferior, Israeli force inflicted a crushing defeat on the combined Arab armies. In this latest examination of the conflict, author Eric Hammel analyzes its origins and conduct and concludes that victory was the product of two decades of Israeli military preparation.

Written from a decidedly pro-Israeli bias (the author's grandfather died at the hands of the Nazis, and Hammel uses almost exclusively Israeli sources), the author attempts to justify Israel's preemptive strike on 5 June as a fulfillment of the first rule of war—that an enemy must be judged on the basis of his capabilities and not on the basis of his intentions. Two decades of Arab-Israeli strife dictated that national survival could be preserved only if Zahal (the Israel Defense Force, or IDF) attained a massive qualitative advantage over its adversaries and if the army used all its power decisively in the form of a lightning preemptive offensive designed to take the war into the enemy lands. By June 1967 Syria, Egypt, and Jordan were capable of launching a three-front war against Israel; therefore, Israel had to assume they would. While many readers may question the (im)morality of this logic, Hammel sees few strategic alternatives available to Israel in 1967.

Hammel, Eric. *Six Days in June: How Israel Won the 1967 Arab-Israeli*