

On Learning From the Wehrmacht

and Other Things

Martin van Creveld



The German Wehrmacht of World War II has been exaulted and debased by thinkers and writers since the end of that conflict. Here a noted researcher and author takes exception to two articles that appeared in Military Review and presents some of his views on the Wehrmacht.

IN TWO articles that appeared in this publication,¹ the extent of the US military's efforts to learn from the German *Wehrmacht* was questioned. The two articles are not identical in all respects, nor is it possible to do justice to the wealth of issues they raise in the space of a few lines. However, I hope I will not be accused of oversimplifying if I sum up their contents as follows:

- So the argument goes, the differences—historical, institutional, cultural, even linguistic—between the *Wehrmacht* and the US military are so profound that no true learning is possible.

- Learning, even if it were possible, would not be worthwhile because the *Wehrmacht* was not as good a fighting machine as has sometimes been advertised.

- Finally, to the extent that it was militarily effective, that effectiveness was so bound up with National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party ideology that we would not want to learn from it even if we could.

The first of these problems concerns me as a professional historian; the second, as a military critic who has helped popularize the study of the German military in this country and has had the good fortune of seeing his writings make a concrete contribution in the form of the US Army COHORT (cohesion, operational readiness and training) system; and the third, as an Israeli and a Jew, part of whose family was exterminated by the Nazis. In this article, I shall address these issues, proceeding in reverse order.

The relationship between the German army and the Nazi Party has formed the subject of an enormous literature.² The sheer volume of these works is such that any attempt to do more than sum up my own opinions—the results of years of research—in the space available would be hopeless.

Let it be put on record, then, that the

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Like many other Germans, some soldiers expressed occasional reservations concerning the brutality of the methods used, a fact which, incidentally, suggests that they were well aware of those methods. In a few cases, the army served as a haven for those who were repelled by the excesses of Nazism and even for a few Jews. On the whole, however, a considerable degree of congruence existed between the goals of the *Wehrmacht* and those of the party. Certainly, it would not be true to say that *ideological* differences between the two put serious obstacles on the *Führer's* path.

The above notwithstanding, Adolf Hitler, during most of his career, regarded the armed services (with the partial exception of the *Luftwaffe*, Hermann Göring's creation) as hopelessly conservative and even reactionary.⁴ As the repeated wholesale

sacking and subsequent executions of senior commanders from 1938 on shows, the gulf between the head of the German state and his top-ranking soldiers tended to grow, accurately reflecting his disillusionment with the "general staff," an institution which, at one time, he had regarded as the greatest in the world.

To repeat, most of these conflicts did not stem from ideological differences concerning ends. Instead, they originated in different appreciations concerning the prospect for attaining those ends and, later in the war, the reasons for failing to achieve them. Hitler tended to see the problem in terms of the refusal of a clique of effete, aristocratic generals to believe in him and the revolutionary ideology that he represented. At a minimum, the *Wehrmacht's* top commanders were regarded as lacking in what he called National Socialist *Glut*, or enthusiasm. Indeed, this consideration led him to authorize the creation of an alternative armed force, namely the *Waffen-SS* (*Schutzstaffeln* Armed Forces) one task of which was the embodiment of that enthusiasm.

Beyond a deep mistrust in the feasibility of Hitler's goals, the leaders of the *Wehrmacht* were also concerned with keeping their independence vis-à-vis the party, a wish that, at one time, led to their acquiescence in (if not active support of) the massacre of Ernst Röhm and his storm trooper cronies. This is hardly the place to chronicle the relationship between the armed forces and party in any detail. Suffice it to say, the former accepted Nazi symbols and engaged in indoctrination, but they never quite succeeded in convincing the latter of their ideological purity.

One reason for this was that the forces insisted on keeping responsibility for propaganda in their own hands and succeeded in doing so during most of the years the regime lasted. Only after 1943 were so-called National Socialist Leadership Officers intro-

duced; even then, most of them were not party hacks but army officers whose position qua overseers remained weak, by no means comparable with that of the Soviet *politruk* (political assistants).

Influenced by propaganda, the *Wehrmacht's* rank and file were probably no more, and no less, "Nazified" than the remainder of German society. There is no doubt that, over the years, most of them came to look at the world in National Socialist terms. To summarize the ideology in somewhat crude terms (which, however, Hitler would have approved as suitable for the primitive understanding of the people), they probably believed that Germany was good and ought to rule Europe, or the world, or whatever.

Although private property and the capitalist system were to remain in force, a "symbolic" form of socialism was to unite all Germans in a tightly knit racial community. Democracy, socialism, trade unions and, of course, Jews, were bad and should be eliminated if not physically exterminated. Finally, pacifism was bad not only for Germany but also per se. War was supposed to be good for people's health, although to my knowledge Hitler never went to the lengths of glorifying it that his Italian colleague Benito Mussolini did.⁵

The extent to which all these beliefs reflected on the *Wehrmacht's* excellence as a fighting machine, or lack of it, may be and has been debated.⁶ Without going too deeply into this question, it is my belief (one which Hitler, as far as the senior leadership was concerned, shared) that ideological considerations did not play much of a role in motivating the German soldier and making him fight as he did. In German society at large, enthusiasm for National Socialism as an ideology probably peaked during the early years of the regime, say until 1937. Subsequently, it cooled down; one reason for this being the population's well-founded fear

1st SS Panzer Division grenadiers take a break under a derelict US Army M8 Greyhound during the Battle of the Bulge, Poteau, Belgium, 18 December 1944. Originally conceived as a force embodying the highest ideals of National Socialism, the SS formed a corps of politically reliable troops to help stiffen the resolve of what Hitler believed to be a weak-kneed Wehrmacht.



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that Hitler was steering the country toward war.

During the war, enthusiasm for the regime fluctuated with its military successes, ebbing steadily after 1941. As the reports of the SS security service, SD, of that period show, the German people were prepared to fight on while simultaneously becoming in-

creasingly cynical about its leadership, Hitler alone excepted.⁷

To sum up, the role of National Socialist ideology in the Wehrmacht's combat power was probably no greater, or less, than that of democratic ideals in the willingness of the US Army to fight. Even if we estimate that role as large, certainly it was only one

among a considerable number of other factors. I, for one, do not see why we should not be able to study those factors and learn from them, if that is desired. So we turn to our second problem, namely whether the German forces represent a military model that is worthy of emulation.

Attempting to determine how good the *Wehrmacht* really was, the first thing to do is to distinguish between the question and problem of victory and defeat. Admittedly, victory and defeat count for much in the reputation of any army; however, they do not count for everything. Numerical inferiority, an impossible strategic situation and any number of other factors may cause even a first-class military force to be overwhelmed through no fault of its own.

Conversely, the fact that a very large force will normally vanquish a much smaller one is, in itself, no cause for admiration. These elementary considerations make it clear that some measure other than, or in addition to, the outcome is necessary for judging military excellence. If not, the very idea of quality, and with it the ability to make any comparisons at all, becomes meaningless.

Not to waste time by a lengthy repetition of a story I and others have told elsewhere,⁸ there can be no doubt that, whatever the criterion one cares to apply, the *Wehrmacht* in World War II certainly fought as well as any force in the 20th century and probably as well as any in history. Its high degree of professionalism (not yet understood as skill in operating "systems," as in the present day US forces, but as an overriding dedication to the understanding and waging of war), the way in which its officers were selected, trained and promoted, the excellence of the replacement system and many other factors that led to this result are not seriously disputed even by the two articles with which I am taking issue here.

This is hardly the place to trace whatever

differences may have existed among the German armed services in this regard, or the way in which the fighting power of these services changed over time. Suffice it to say that, by dint of a superb performance on the tactical and operational levels, the *Wehrmacht* achieved some triumphs so great, and so unexpected, that they have become almost legendary. As to its defensive success, one can only hope that the United States and its NATO allies on the Central Front will fight as tenaciously, and hold out as long, as the Germans did against the same enemy in 1943-45.

This is not to say that the *Wehrmacht* was perfect in every respect. However high its sheer fighting power and however good its performance on the tactical and operational levels, serious questions remain about overall strategy in a conflict where the balance of resources was such that, if truth is to be said, it should never have been fought at all. In volume upon volume of memoirs, the German generals have sought to deny their responsibility for the conduct of war on this level. According to them, whatever mistakes took place were made exclusively by Hitler, a leader who not only ran strategy, but also insisted on intervening in operational decisions to the point that, time after time, he managed to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory.⁹

Without attempting a case-by-case examination of the extent to which Hitler was personally responsible for the *Wehrmacht's* failures (and its successes), it is beyond question that the German higher direction of the war was less successful than that of the Western Allies and, in the end, that of the Soviet Union as well. The *Führer's* personality apart, there were reasons for this failure, and these will bear some thought.

In any army, the way the top leadership performs is in large part a function of the way in which they are trained and prepared for command. The German *Kriegsakade-*

2nd Parachute Division mortar team on the Russian Front, spring 1944. The division was sent to the Normandy-Brittany area of France shortly before D-Day.



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mie, the top-ranking military institute of higher learning since the days of von Scharnhorst and von Gneisenau, was designed to enable an officer to perform as an operations officer, doubling as chief of staff, in a division. A *Wehrmachtakademie* (armed forces war college), which opened its doors shortly before the outbreak of World War II, never amounted to much and had to be closed before the first class could complete its studies.¹⁰ Consequently, German commanders from the rank of lieutenant colonel up, having spent three years at an academy where about one-half of all the time was devoted to tactics, were unrivaled experts in the operational art. Their understanding of the nonmilitary aspects of war-

was very limited, however, and in the end this proved their undoing.

As if to emphasize the strengths and weaknesses of the *Generalitat*, consider the "great" German generals to come out of World War II: Erich von Manstein, an operational genius, Erwin Rommel, an excellent field commander and a good tactician; Heinz Guderian, a superb armored leader who, by his own admission (true or false), cared nothing for politics; Karl Doenitz, a jumped-up *Kapitänleutnant* who never even suspected there was more to the world than U-boats.

Albert Kesselring, Walter Model, Kurt Student, Lothar Rendulic, et al were exceedingly tough officers who fought as hard and



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as well as any commanders of equivalent rank in history. Not having commanded forces amounting to more than a few army corps, these men were Germany's Pattons. By no stretch of the imagination is it possible to see them take on the mantle of an Eisenhower, a MacArthur or a Nimitz. The only officer on the German side who might conceivably have done well on that level was Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, who not incidentally belonged to an older generation, had been retired in 1938 and was brought back when the war broke out.

Unlike his generals, Hitler was a man who had never undergone special training in the conduct of war. He had, however, served long periods at the front, thus giving him not only a good understanding of the common soldier, but an advantage over some staff officers who did not have such experience. Besides, he was a man who had read much, albeit in an unorganized way, and even during the war contrived to read—or at least skim—one book a day.¹¹

Hitler regarded himself, not without reason, as much better informed about the overall situation than any of his generals. Particularly during the later years of the war, whenever the generals tried to open his eyes to the "true" situation at the front, he was able to outmaneuver them by evading the military issues in favor of technological, political and historical arguments. To put it a different way, one very important (but, understandably, seldom mentioned) reason why Hitler was able to make most of his generals fight for him for so long was that he knew more than they did. They knew it, and he knew that they did.

To adduce but a single example of the way things worked, consider the July 1941 dispute between Hitler and the army's General Staff as to whether Moscow or the Ukraine should be the next objective. The staff, thinking in military terms, wanted the former. Failing to convince Hitler, they had Guderian fly back from his *panzergruppe* command to confront him in person. Hitler received Guderian at his Rastenburg headquarters, listened to him for an hour and then quietly countered that the generals understood nothing about the economic side of war. This made Guderian get up, salute and announce his readiness to drive into the Ukraine or wherever else the *Führer* would order him to go. He changed his mind because what Hitler said was true.¹²

Quite apart from the fact that Germany's generals were entirely lacking in the kind of



Fourth Panzer Army troops conducting operations to mop up Soviet resistance in Kharkov after its recapture on 14 March 1943.

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preparation necessary for the conduct of modern total war and were thus forced to leave this aspect to Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, Albert Speer and other civilians, the *Wehrmacht's* top-level command arrangements were disastrous.¹³ The constant friction between the Army High Command (*OKH*) and the Armed Forces High Command (*OKW*), the Navy High Command (*OKM*) and the Air Force High Command (*OKL*) was due partly to Hitler's system of divide and rule and partly to deeply rooted institutional factors. Whatever the reasons, the arrangements that existed precluded efficient cooperation between navy and air force. At the same time, they made it difficult, if not impossible, for anybody except the *Führer* to gain an overall perspective on the war. After 1941, when Hitler appointed himself commander in chief of the army as well as of the armed forces, the command structure caused a number of units to be permanently shuttled between *OKH* and *OKW* theaters

of war, with a corresponding loss of strength.¹⁴

Although an examination of the German armed forces' strong and weak points could go on forever, the time for conclusions has arrived. I would argue that, for all its weaknesses at the top, the *Wehrmacht*, up to army level inclusive, was second to no fighting machine in history and better than any in the 20th century. I see no reason why the factors that made for that excellence cannot, prima facie, be isolated, studied and learned from.

Even if one insists on emphasizing the *Wehrmacht's* weaknesses, those, too, would offer lessons to be avoided. And so we turn to our final problem, namely, whether the differences that do exist between Germany and the United States permit learning to take hold at all.

Among the several arguments that have been adduced to disprove the possibility of learning from history—in this case, the

Wehrmacht—the one most easily disposed of concerns the difference in language. It is quite true, as I have pointed out elsewhere,¹⁵ that many of the most important German military terms do not have precise English equivalents. This does not mean, however, that they cannot be understood, or else all cross-cultural communication would be im-

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possible by definition. Instead, all it means is that somebody should take the trouble to study the original sources. Having been studied, they should be translated as carefully and as accurately as possible, perhaps with the addition of some marginal comments for those who do not have access to the original. I, for one, do not see any further technical obstacles this problem could cause.

More seriously, it has been suggested that applying the *Wehrmacht's* experience is impossible because the historical and institutional setting in which it lived and operated was utterly different from anything experienced by the US military. Thus, German society used to be hierarchic, authoritarian and antidemocratic. American society is (or is supposed to be) democratic, libertarian and egalitarian. German society was militaristic, whereas American society is not. The place occupied by the German armed forces, the army in particular, in German society cannot be compared to that of the US military in American society—it was far more important and far more elevated.

This list of differences could be extended indefinitely, but the point is clear. Armed forces are necessarily rooted in their societies, so the argument goes, and these societies are (in this case, and perhaps in every case) so different from each other that any attempt to isolate individual traits and apply them in another context can only lead to distortion, even assuming it is possible at all.

There is, without a doubt, some truth in this argument. History, it has been, well said, is a seamless web; every factor is inextricably bound up with every other so that one cannot be extracted without, to some extent, altering the rest. Like all good arguments, however, this one has its limits. If pushed too far, it will turn into an absurd caricature of itself. Thus, although it is certainly true that the method of *Auftrag* and *Weisung* has deep roots in German military history, it is not necessarily true that a non-German armed force has to traverse that history in its entirety to understand, and apply, that method.

Although the German casualty replacement system as it worked in World War II had everything to do with the institutional development of the German army, one does not necessarily have to duplicate the German experience and divide the United States into many independent principalities to comprehend and adapt the essential features of that system to American needs. Again, examples could be multiplied, but this is really superfluous. To argue that one cannot learn from the past, (in this case) by altering any part of one's military forces because every part is rooted in historical experience and linked to each other, amounts to the denial of human free will and a surrender to historical determinism—a doctrine which, aside from everything else, is decidedly un-American.

Finally, it is simply not true that learning from (again, in this case) military history

consists, or should consist, solely of imitating the best features found in another army. I have put my views of this problem on record elsewhere.¹⁶ Here I will say only that the real aim of learning, including historical learning, is *causas rerum cognoscere*, to understand the causes of things. History provides us with a guide, perhaps even the only possible guide, as to why things are as they are. It also tells us the way in which various factors relate to each other and, hence, constitutes a map, however unsatisfactory and however difficult to read, of what may happen to one of them if we alter the rest.

To return to the problem at hand, if we are to profit from studying the *Wehrmacht*—or any other historical armed force—it is necessary to find out how it operated, why it operated as it did and what were its weaknesses as well as its strengths. Once we know this, we can carefully consider the political, institutional and strategic differences; the things that have and have not changed dur-

ing the last four decades, what is and what is not relevant, what can and cannot be done.

In conclusion, a brief recapitulation of my thesis may be appropriate. I have argued that National Socialist ideology was only one factor among many that helped produce whatever fighting qualities the *Wehrmacht* may have had, and that the connection between the two was, in fact, so tenuous that studying and even imitating those qualities does not automatically turn one into a Nazi. The *Wehrmacht* had its weaknesses as well as its strengths. While the weaknesses should be avoided, the strengths in many respects were quite remarkable so that a modern military force seeking to improve its fighting power could do worse than studying and adapting them to its needs. Finally, although it is true that every historical and institutional setting is unique, this fact in itself precludes neither learning from history nor effecting—limited, to be sure—changes based on it. With that my case is completed, and the defense will now take a break. \square

NOTES

1 Roger A. Beaumont, "On the *Wehrmacht* Mystique," *Military Review* (July 1986) 44–56; Daniel J. Hughes, "Abuses of German Military History," *Military Review* (December 1986) 67–76.

2 See, in English, J. Wheeler Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power* (London 1953); G. Craig, *The Powers of the Prussian Army* (Oxford, 1955); R. J. O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party* (London, 1966); in German, C. Gorrlich, *Der deutsche Generalstab* (Munich, 1955); G. Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk*, vol. 4 (Munich) 1970); M. Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS Staat* (Hamburg, 1969); K. J. Mueller, *Das Heer und Hitler* (Stuttgart, 1969) and G. Papke, *Wehrmacht und Nationalsozialismus 1933–1939* (Munich, 1978).

3 See M. Messerschmidt, "The Wehrmacht and the Volksgemeinschaft," *Journal of Contemporary History* (October 1983) 719–44.

4 Hermann Rauschning, *Hitler's so called* (Paris, 1939), particularly chapter 12. As one would expect, the same motif reappears in Hitler's last words as dictated to Martin Bormann, *The Testament of Adolf Hitler* (London, 1960), 59.

5 See the official *La Dottrina del Fascismo* (Rome, 1939), 63ff.

6 Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance, 1939–1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

7 See *Meldungen aus dem Reich* ed. H. Biberach (Neuwied 1965) *passim*.

8 van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, *passim*; T. N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War: The German Army and General Staff 1807–1945* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1977), 1–8 and 336–43.

9 Among the numerous works that develop this theme are F. Halder, *Hitler as War Lord* (London 1950); E. von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Chicago 1958); W. Warrenton, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters* (London, 1964); and any other number of German military memoirs. A book that is entirely devoted to debunking Hitler as a military commander is G. Buchheit, *Hitler der Feldherr* (Rastatt, 1956) for correctives see D. Irving, *Hitler's War* (London, 1976) as well as Martin van Creveld, "Warlord Hitler: Some Points Reconsidered," *European Studies Review* (March 1974).

10 For German higher military training between the wars, see H. Teksio, *Die selbsten Spiegel* (Hedelberg, 1952), and H. Model, *Der deutsche Generalstabsoffizier* (Frankfurt am Main, 1965).

11 The best account of Hitler's route to a member of his staff (not a general) is P. E. Schramm, *Hitler, the Man and the Military Leader* (Chicago, 1971).

12 For Guderian's own account of this episode, see his *Panzer Leader* (London, 1952); 200 for the general staff's reaction; F. Halder, *Kriegstagebuch* (Stuttgart, 1963), vol. II, entry for 24 August 1941, 194–95.

13 Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 165.

14 An excellent short analysis of these arrangements is M. Howard, *The Central Organization of Defense* (London, 1970), 55–56.

15 van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 165.

16 Martin van Creveld, "Caesar's Ghost: Military History and the Wars of the Future," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 1980) 67–75; "Thoughts on Military History," *Journal of Contemporary History*, (October 1983, 549–65) and *Command in War* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), introduction.

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