


Where Have All the Nazis Gone?
A Study of German Memoirs from the Second World War


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Introduction

“I was able to demonstrate a motor-cycle platoon, an anti-tank platoon, a platoon of Panzer I’s in the experimental form of the time...Hitler was much impressed by the speed and precision of movement of our units, and said repeatedly: ‘That’s what I need! That’s what I want to have!’...the General Staff Officers who stood between Blomberg and me – were the principle obstacle to this plan.”¹

The main purpose of this study is to suggest that the memoirs produced by German soldiers after the Second World War attempt to disentangle what they perceived to be Germany’s triumphs from the taint of Nazism, and that this disentangling is not possible. By all accounts, Hitler emerges as the central, enabling figure in the development of modern war doctrine and cultural views thereof leading up to and throughout the war. Until recently, it had been thought that the Wehrmacht had largely been uninvolved with and unaffected by the Nazis. Through the 1980s, as the historian Omer Bartov shows, “the impression created as early as the Nuremburg Trials, that while some generals had collaborated with the regime, the ordinary soldier had had nothing to do with ‘all that’, remained unchanged.”² Only in the late 1990s did it become accepted in Germany and elsewhere that the Wehrmacht may have had a much more integral role in the perpetration of Nazi Germany’s most heinous crimes, and more importantly to this study, that Hitler had played a much more central role in driving and animating the German armed forces. Although it is unclear to what extent the Wehrmacht directly contributed to the killing of Jews, recent findings “threaten to undermine the last bastion in the narrative of the Wehrmacht as having conducted a ‘clean’ and professional war.”³

¹ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952, 1996), 30.

² See Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-1945, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, (Oxford: Palgrave, 1985, 2001), xvii.

³ Bartov, xxi.

This study places itself in the historiography by suggesting that even the memoirs – what the soldiers felt comfortable saying publicly – undermines this narrative.

As far as the memoirs of the German generals go, they describe how Germany broke *Stellungskrieg*, achieved mobile warfare, and found – surprising to themselves and the rest of the world – brilliant initial success.⁴ Since the First World War, the German army had been looking for a way to escape the attrition warfare experienced on the Western Front, as clearly unsustainable for Germany, especially against a superior coalition. The answer came in the shape of technological innovations, particularly the Luftwaffe and the Panzer arm. These revolutionary means were most enthusiastically endorsed by theorists affected by a “fascist mood,”⁵ which saw mechanization as the way of the future. The roots of Germany’s society, militarized by National Socialism, lent themselves to radical, particularly aggressive views of war, which technology promised to make more effective. These technological advances would be the decisive factor in allowing Germany to defeat her foes. In describing the development of these technologies and their uses in the war, the generals in their memoirs express a tension between admissions of critical Nazi political support in rearmament, a questionable war record, and the desire to preserve the Prussian tradition, status of the old elites, and the self-respect of men who thought themselves gentlemen.

For the common soldiers, the disentangling from Nazism comes in the form of repudiating Nazism and downplaying its role, particularly as the soldiers maintain that participation in war is a dutiful and honorable enterprise. Consistently throughout the memoirs, both of generals and soldiers, one finds the presupposition that war is a good

⁴ *Stellungskrieg* roughly means “positional warfare.” It was used to describe the trench warfare of the First World War.

⁵ “Fascist mood” refers to a concept that is developed by Azar Gat in *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*.

thing. This view of warfare, as political scientist Azar Gat persuasively shows, existed in close affinity with “the cultural and intellectual currents partaking of the proto-fascist and fascist outlook, or ‘mood’.”⁶ Two key components of the proto-fascist view of warfare concern us: its radical visions of machine warfare in its several variations, and a Social-Darwinist interpretation of politics and international competition. However, the revelations, as they call them, of the Holocaust threatened to overturn this worldview. Hence, the common soldiers sought to disentangle their feelings about the war from the pernicious association with Nazism.

This interpretation of the memoirs sheds light on several issues. First, it complicates the role of the Nazis in the memoirs. Not only do the authors distance themselves from the Nazis in order to save face, they are attempting to preserve their ideas about war from being discounted with the rest of Nazism. Second, by distinguishing between the role of the Nazis in the war and their role as commanders, the generals establish an aspect of the war of which they can be proud. Whereas others wrote about the possibilities of machine warfare, the Germans uniquely (in their eyes) realized its potential. This further explains the unapologetic tone in which the generals discuss the war. If they were an aristocratic elite, then war once again became the occupation of gentleman and was not shameful. Celebrating ideals associated with machines – action, vigor, and speed – the generals combined modernism with proto-fascism, identifying little with the agrarian mythology of National Socialism. Instead, they espoused views more in accord with those of Douhet, who proposed that machine warfare would require elite soldiers. They thought themselves modern gentlemen, using terms such as “knight” and “chivalry to describe their perceptions of warfare. Indeed, in the proto-fascist view

⁶ Gat, 3.

war was positively “hygienic.”⁷ Finally, the tensioned view of war as espoused by the Generals may help explain the stark contrast in the level of brutality between the Eastern and Western fronts. Whereas the Eastern front was marked by intense, increasing barbarization,⁸ the Western Front has been described as *krieg ohne hass* or a “war without hate.” While the Nazi racial ideology established the Russians as sub-human and the Anglo-Saxons as near-equals to the Germans, the idea of aristocratic warriors as found in the memoirs helps to explain the quite friendly way in which the German generals perceived and treated their Western counterparts.⁹

By way of contrast, the common soldier did not try to argue for any particular view of warfare. Overwhelmed by the immediacy of combat, the soldiers’ memoirs serve as a counter-balance to the ideal proposed by the generals. Removed from day to day combat, the generals were able to preserve their ideal of aristocratic warfare. On the front lines, however, the brutality of modern warfare as described in the soldiers’ memoirs belies any such idealization. The common soldiers’ difficulty lies in remembering a fruitless war that consumed their lives and country. They stress the bonds of brotherhood that formed as emotional and mental anchors. Nevertheless, they were victims of Hitler’s war machine, and in the 1950s West German society acknowledged them as such. Whereas the generals concerned themselves with disavowing Nazism, the ordinary soldiers came to portray themselves, with the help of West Germans, as victims of the Nazis.

⁷ Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 3-5, 49.

⁸ See Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-1945. German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare.* (Oxford: Palgrave, 1985, 2001)

⁹ For a book devoted to this theme, see John Bierman and Colin Smith, *Alamein: War without Hate.* (London: Viking 2002). Examples of this will appear in later discussions.

Chapter one analyzes the memoirs of several German generals by asking three questions: how do they characterize themselves, how do they characterize Hitler, and how do they talk about the war? Chapter two asks the same three questions of memoirs produced by frontline soldiers in order to ascertain the content of these memoirs. Chapter three will then present secondary research in comparison with the claims made in these memoirs, analyzing the worldviews of the generals and considering the victim-hood of the common soldiers.

The German memoir literature of the Second World War has earned its place on bookstore shelves. Written by the likes of Erich von Manstein, Heinz Guderian, Guy Sajer, and Michael Wittmann, these memoirs have been staples for amateur and professional historians alike. With many of them translated into English, these memoirs have benefited from a pronounced tendency in World War II scholarship, which “was conceived, researched and written very much in the venerable tradition of high politics, diplomacy, and decision-making.”¹⁰ Often well written, and years after the fact, these memoirs have, until recently, been perceived as authoritative.¹¹ Research, however, has raised numerous questions regarding the authenticity of several of these “classic” memoirs. Manstein’s memoir has been characterized by the historian Gerhard Weinberg as dishonest and at times faked. The accuracy of Guy Sajer’s classic *Forgotten Soldier* has been called into question regarding details that would not have been available to a common soldier. These challenges are interesting, but they are not as interesting as the texts themselves, and what they tell us about the attitudes of generals and soldiers.

¹⁰ Bartov, xvi.

¹¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, “World War II Scholarship, Now and in the Future,” *The Journal of Military History* 61 (1997): 335. Weinberg writes that the memoirs translated into English especially became the “staple basis of much written about the war,” by scholars and amateurs alike.

It is obvious that someone who had served Hitler's regime would omit details regarding involvement with or knowledge of the atrocities committed during the war. Less obvious is the impression one gets after reading many memoirs that *no one* was a Nazi. Where have all the Nazis gone? Reading the memoirs, whether written by a general or a frontline soldier, leaves one with the impression that the Nazis were some distant other, minor characters in the play. Found repeatedly throughout this literature is the refrain "We were just German soldiers." The German soldiers fought honorably and well. The Army was hijacked by the Nazis for their crooked purposes. The soldiers were victims of patriotism twisted by a lunatic. This is how the generals defended their vision of war.

However, there is the glaring incongruity, as the authors distance themselves from the Nazis but not the war itself. That is, there is little to no recognition that they fought in an unjust war which Germany had initiated. Germany began the Second World War by attacking Poland. Hitler had previously signaled his expansionist desires by annexing Austria and taking over the Sudetenland. Sensing weakness on the part of the British and French, he then moved against Poland, then France and England, then Russia, and he declared war on the United States. The Second World War resulted in the deaths of many millions of people, most of them civilians. The memoirs leave such facts unrecorded. Once again, the proto-fascist vision of war comes into play. Warfare is not to be avoided; rather, it is necessary for the advancement of the state, even humankind.

In fact, one finds pride rather than guilt. Generals like Manstein, Guderian, and Kesselring describe their victories with pride. These generals cultivate an image of themselves as having been very good at their craft. They focus almost entirely on the

operational aspects of the war, consciously excluding the political aspects, and they do so with no small sense of relish. Their victories were, without a doubt, an impressive display of the military art: in reality, however, these victories took place as part of an aggressive war of expansion and domination. This fact seems to elude the authors, as does, from the Social Darwinist perspective, the emptiness of these victories in the face of ultimate German defeat. According to the propaganda that fueled the war against Russia, defeat proved the Germans inferior people. But even defeat could not extinguish their pride.

But even where one does find some discussion of the reasons for war, one finds justifications, not apologies. War was something for which they had been training, as their enthusiasm for rearmament makes clear. The memoirs of the regular soldiers demonstrate well their excitement at preparing for war and the heady days of victory prior to the battle of Stalingrad. This stands in contrast to the attitudes found later in the works, where the authors generally describe themselves as pessimistic, disillusioned, and critical of the war. With the memoirs usually being written many years after the fact, it is more likely that the latter sentiments are post-war inventions.

The primary sources for this work then are the memoirs themselves. For the general's perspective, the works of Albert Kesselring, Heinz Guderian, Hans von Luck, and Erich von Manstein are some of the memoirs that will be used in this analysis. B.H. Liddell Hart's work *The German Generals Talk* is also useful since it contains many direct exchanges conducted by Liddell Hart shortly after the war. As for the common soldiers, the works of Guy Sajer, Gottlob Bidermann, Bruno Manz, and Siegfried Knappe have proven very useful, as has Stephen Fritz's thorough profile of the regular soldier in *Frontsoldaten*. These works comprise a representative sample of the memoirs translated

into English, but more importantly, they include the “classics” that have directly contributed to the myth in question. These high-profile memoirs are cited in numerous secondary works, and they are familiar to anyone who thoroughly studies the Second World War. In this sense then the memoirs chosen form a necessary and sufficient sample: that they are the works most familiar to those who study the Second World War and they are the works most used to support arguments relating to German memoirs. One might also notice that, with the exceptions of Kesselring and von Luck, all the soldiers whose memoirs appear in this study fought on the Eastern Front against the Soviet Union, and much of the historical research presented deals with the Eastern Front. This is because a vast majority of Germany’s manpower was deployed to fight the Soviets, and the Eastern Front best illustrates the questions this study addresses.

It is also important to explain several terms that will be used throughout this study. The *Waffen SS* refers to those army divisions which were formed out of Himmler’s *Schutzstaffel* (“Protective Squadron”), who were initially charged with protecting Hitler’s person. They were resented by many in the regular army because, being an extension of the Nazi regime, they were favored by Hitler in receiving the first shipments of new weapons, tanks, and supplies. Many divisions of the *Waffen SS* were found to have been involved in war crimes and were condemned at Nuremberg. The term *Wehrmacht* refers to the German military as a whole, which was divided into the *Heer* (army), *Luftwaffe* (air force), and *Kriegsmarine* (navy). Finally, the term *Landser* is used to denote the frontline soldier, and it is the term German soldiers used to describe themselves.

Chapter 1

The German Generals Speak

The German generals who fought and served the Third Reich during the Second World War had many reasons to write their memoirs. Whether it was therapeutic, to present themselves in a favorable light, to honor the soldiers who fought under them or to simply help those who were searching find the truth, the German generals certainly produced their memoirs in profusion.¹ Two reasons for writing consistently crop up in the introductions to and in the bodies of the memoirs. First, the generals want to honor the soldiers that served under them, specifically the *German* soldier as distinguished from Axis or volunteers from other countries. And second, writing their memoirs generally in the fifties, they felt a need to present the truth for later generations. Along with these reasons for writing the memoirs, three questions help lay out the general effect of their content. One can put the memoirs in their proper historical context by answering how the generals characterized themselves, how they characterized Hitler, and how they talked about the war.

While there is some variation in their social background, the generals in question experienced similar educations.² All enlisted as cadets in the German military, after having finished their primary and secondary schooling and attended military schools. As such, they differed from Hitler in having risen to positions of command through typical army structures, gaining promotions and becoming acquainted with army doctrine and culture. All served as officers in the First World War, a possible source of tension with

¹ Gerhard L. Weinberg, "World War II Scholarship, Now and in the Future," *Journal of Military History* 61 (1997): 335.

² Walter Gornitz, introduction to *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Keitel*, by Wilhelm Keitel (New York: Stein and Day, 1961, 1966). While appearing to the Allies to be the archetypical *Junkers*-style militarist, Field Marshal Keitel draws attention to the anti-Prussian tradition of his Hanoverian farming family.

Hitler, who only achieved the enlisted rank of corporal. Most critically for this study, the generals were educated men, receiving much of their instruction from the military, and were officers. Describing the source of tension between himself and Hitler, Field Marshal Keitel remarked, "Hitler was no officer, and lacked education, and was a revolutionary."³ These two conditions defined their outlooks and their relations with Hitler.

Field Marshal of the Luftwaffe Albrecht Kesselring directly addressed the reasons for writing his memoirs. While in American custody after the war, he began discussions with other German staff officers regarding a compilation of their experiences. He argued, and with some evident success since he refers to the utility of their work, that "our only chance of paying a tribute to our soldiers and at the same time influencing Allied historians in the interests of truth" was to create a memoir-style work.⁴ Evidently, many felt, whether due to their exposure to the press or their experiences at Nuremburg, that members of the Allied forces had misrepresented the German generals' experiences. It has been often said that the victors write the history, so it is no surprise that Kesselring and others felt the need to write down their experiences in service of the "truth." Interestingly, Kesselring mentions that their work was meant for "Allied historians in the interests of truth." He appears quite aware of the judgment of history, suggesting that it will be Allied historians, rather than German, who will pass judgment on his actions. No doubt this perception was influenced by his exposure to journalist B.H. Liddell Hart, who conducted interviews with all the prominent German generals shortly following the war.⁵

³ Quoted in Robert Gellately, ed., *The Nuremburg Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 165.

⁴ Albrecht Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring* (London: Greenhill Books, 1988), 296.

⁵ Kesselring, 314. Interviews refer to B.H. Liddell Hart's work, *The German Generals Talk*, (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1948).

At the end of his memoir, Kesselring returns to these concerns. He hopes his memoir might “contribute something towards a truthful record of a good piece of German history.”⁶ Again, he is concerned with historical “truth,” hoping to influence its record. He dismisses the notion that he is writing merely to record his own experiences. He appears far too self-aware for that. The last sentence of his memoir pleads before history’s court. “In the ancient saying *errare humanum est*,” he writes, “we can hear man’s cry for self-determination and a warning not to be hasty in passing judgment on other people.”⁷ Clearly, he was concerned that posterity will judge him unfavorably, lumping him, presumably, with the Nazis. Perhaps this illustrates lingering doubts regarding his actions, and a desire to obscure his wrongdoing by alluding to the spectre of human fallibility. More likely, Kesselring feared that history would judge him and his compatriots guilty as had the Nuremburg tribunal.

Among Kesselring’s fellow generals found guilty at Nuremburg was Field Marshal Erich von Manstein. While he appears less concerned about the judgment of history, Manstein echoes Kesselring’s belief that by writing his memoir he is adding a valuable perspective to the historical record. Admitting that his work will be subjective, he hopes that his memoir “will be of some use to historians, for even they cannot get the truth from files and documents alone.”⁸ Like Kesselring, Manstein feels that there is an element missing from the accounts of the Second World War that can only be revealed by those involved. This is certainly a reasonable concern and accurate, but one must pay extra attention to a work that seeks to add to the historical record. This self-consciousness

⁶ *Ibid*, 315.

⁷ *Ibid*, 296, 315.

⁸ Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, trans. Anthony G. Powell (Novato: Presidio Press 1958, 1982), 17.

of purpose, of adding to the truthfulness of the accounts of the war. should be considered when weighing the claims of Manstein's and other's memoirs.

Whereas Kesselring seems particularly concerned with history's account of the war and his actions, for Manstein this appears secondary. He stresses the second theme for writing memoirs, namely to honor the German soldiers who served under his command. In discussing his purposes for recording his experiences, Manstein primarily hoped to "have made it consistently clear that the *decisive factor* throughout was the self-sacrifice, valour and devotion to duty of the German *fighting soldier*, combined with the ability of *commanders* at all levels and their readiness to assume responsibility."⁹ He adds, these qualities won the German forces their victories. These qualities indicate Manstein's larger aims. He calls "self-sacrifice, valour and devotion to duty" the *decisive factors*, thus anticipating the arguments of many historians for the German army's successes. Manstein does not point to superior technology, morale, training, or genius of the German General Staff; rather, he argues that the virtues of the German soldier brought victory. One might find these same virtues in any tribute to any nation's soldiers. Indeed, Manstein argues that the German soldiers, if superior in anything, were superior in virtue, rather than villainy.

Against the backdrop of the atrocities committed by Hitler's regime, these claims take on special significance. Recently, historians have debated the question of the complicity of ordinary German soldiers and civilians in the war crimes committed by Hitler's Third Reich. Omer Bartov has shown that until recently historians credited the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

Wehrmacht with having conducted a clean, professional war.¹⁰ Manstein contributed to this narrative through his efforts to preserve the reputation of the German *fighting soldier* at least, perhaps acknowledging that other elements of the Wehrmacht were not worthy of such praise. What stands out, however, is the lack of an object in the final clause “their readiness to assume responsibility.” The commanders assumed responsibility *for what?* Presumably Manstein refers to the readiness of the German commanders to assume their responsibilities of leadership. But this statement proves more problematic than Manstein anticipated, abdicating responsibility for many wartime events, including the infamous Commissar Order.¹¹ Additionally, it becomes hard to accept the sincerity of Manstein’s tribute to the common German soldier, considering that he and other German officers signed off on the execution of some 30,000 of their own soldiers.¹² This is probably not the self-sacrifice to which he referred.

How then do the German generals characterize themselves in their memoirs? First, they portray themselves as being apolitical. Their memoirs deal almost exclusively with the operational aspects of the war, and where they do discuss political matters, they assume the perspective of an outsider watching events unfold around them.¹³ Hans von Luck watches with delight as the Wehrmacht rearms and expands, but admits that he failed to read between the lines as Hitler’s regime continued to militarize.¹⁴ A conscious effort was made through their memoirs, as “German military officers themselves worked

¹⁰ Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front 1941-1945. German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (Oxford: Palgrave, 1985, 2001), xxi.

¹¹ Manstein, 179-180. The Commissar Order, and issued by Hitler, required the on-site execution of Red Army commissars, a clear violation of international law.

¹² Gerhard L. Weinberg, “World War II Scholarship, Now and in the Future,” *Journal of Military History* 61 (1997): 374.

¹³ Manstein, 21. “I watched political developments... from a point far from the centre...”

¹⁴ Hans von Luck, *Panzer Commander*, (New York: Praeger, 1989), 11.

especially hard to recoup the image of honorable, apolitical professionals after the war.”¹⁵ Manstein deliberately refuses to address political issues, writing in its preface, “This book is the personal narrative of a *soldier*, in which I have deliberately refrained from discussing political problems or matters with no direct bearing on events in the military field.”¹⁶ By this omission Manstein defines himself as a soldier, not a politician. He takes for granted this distinction, believing the narrative of a soldier can be told without delving into the political causes for which he and others went to war.

But this is not the only way in which Manstein builds the case for his exclusion from the politics of the war. In his discussion of what he calls the “Polish Question” – that of the previously German territories claimed by Poland through the Treaty of Versailles – Manstein discusses the feasibility of a military solution solely through the eyes of a military strategist. Absent are concerns for international law or opinion: rather, his calculus only includes Germany’s abilities to fight France, the Soviet Union, or both.¹⁷ His mind only considers the military aspects of the problem, what one might expect from a product of the German General Staff.

Manstein is not unique in his divorcing the politician and the soldier. General Heinz Guderian echoes this sentiment, arguing that the politicians lay down policy, and when war starts, a soldier can only concern himself with the military situation as it presents itself.¹⁸ On its face, this statement seems true enough, and the fact that both Manstein and Guderian insist on the separation between military and political leaders

¹⁵ Norman J. Goda, “Black Marks: Hitler’s Bribery of His Senior Officers during World War II.” *Journal of Modern History* 72, (2000): 414.

¹⁶ Manstein, 17.

¹⁷ Manstein, 24-26.

¹⁸ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, trans. Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: Da Capo Press, 1952, 1996), 463.

suggests that it was an institutional idea, rather than a post-war creation. As one historian notes in reference to the American system of civilian control of the military, “the traditions of almost monkish divorcement of military policy from political affairs...of corporate anonymity in planning and command...of selfless devotion to the sovereign and state...’ are features of our own military system derived to some degree from the German General Staff.”¹⁹ Manstein notes that he has “departed from Colonel-General v. Seeckt’s precept that General Staff officers should be nameless.” in describing his own role in the development of the plan for the 1940 offensive that eventually defeated France. In the minds of Guderian and Manstein, the division between military and political matters resulted from the military institution in which they were educated. This institution stressed unswerving loyalty to the sovereign as its moral foundation, with the term *Generalstabdienst*, or “General Staff Service” appearing as early as 1640.²⁰ In accordance with the longstanding tradition of the German General Staff which stressed anonymity in planning and a divorcement from political matters, the memoirs of both Guderian and Manstein seek to avoid political affairs, dealing strictly with military operations.

Kesselring reinforces this concept of professional ignorance, writing that “I was not informed of the strategic concentration in the west or of Hitler’s plan of attack.”²¹ At this point in Kesselring’s memoir, Germany had already invaded Poland and was in the “Phony War” period prior to the invasion of France. Kesselring’s point is that had he been aware of or involved in the political aims of Germany, he would have been preparing his forces for the invasion of France. Instead, he claims, he busied himself with

¹⁹Dale O. Smith, “Observations on the German General Staff,” *Military Affairs* 27 (1963): 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ Kesselring, 49.

tasks such as conditioning his forces. This narrowness of focus, he argues provides “the advantage...that commanders at all levels are compelled to fix their minds on a single task. their own.”²² This statement reinforces the idea that German officers were apolitical, along with the argument that this ignorance of political affairs was institutionally based, and preferred by generals such as Kesselring. The journalist B.H. Liddell Hart arrived at the same conclusion after conducting extensive interviews following the war, finding the generals to be “essentially technicians...with little idea of things outside [their profession].”²³ This impression is certainly borne out in the memoirs and by observations made by those who encountered the German generals, but whether this apolitical nature was sincere or a post-war creation remains open to question.

Indeed, Azar Gat addresses this designation of the generals as essentially technicians. “totally preoccupied with technologies and techniques of warfare, losing sight of the overall strategic picture,” finding it potentially misleading.²⁴ He attributes their abdication of strategic direction to Hitler to their degree of political radicalism, rather than their absorption with their craft. Whereas generals of the old general staff, such as Beck, believed that Hitler was leading Germany into a disastrous world war, the younger generation – with whose memoirs this study is concerned – followed Hitler’s lead in supporting “more forceful means, more extreme measures, and more risky initiatives” to assure Germany’s revival.²⁵ In addition, the younger German military generation found support in Ludendorff’s book *The Total War* (1936), in which he argued that after Clausewitz, the entire effort of a nation politically ought to be guided by

²² *Ibid.*, 49.

²³ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1948), x.

²⁴ Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 98.

²⁵ Gat, 99. Beck was the Chief of the General Staff in the early to mid 1930s, when German rearmament was just getting started.

preparations for maximum effectiveness in total war. More specifically, he wrote, "The total war requires a decisive and therefore inexorable war action on the part of the leader...The attack remains the absolutely decisive form of fighting...It is erroneous to believe that a war must necessarily be started by a declaration of war."²⁶ This, from a highly respected man of the older generation, gave them a powerful justification: indeed, Hitler seemed to promote the very same ideas. Sensing that the balance of warfare may have shifted to the offense through mechanization, the younger generals pushed strongly for massive rearmament, especially in the form of tanks and aircraft. Guderian, one of the most vocal proponents of armored warfare, reveals this political radicalism through his assessment of Beck. He claims, "Beck was above all a procrastinator in military as in political matters."²⁷ As a result of their political radicalism, the younger generals identified Hitler as a key ally in advancing Germany's military revival as well as advancing their own careers. Thus, they were blinded, if anything, by personal ambition, rather than the intricacies of their craft.²⁸

Gat's attribution of political radicalism to the younger generals complicates their protestations of political ignorance. In referring to the traditions of the German general staff, which stressed unwavering obedience to the sovereign, the generals attempt to deflect responsibility for enabling Hitler to lead Germany to war. However, as Gat suggests, it was personal ambition and, to a degree, political radicalism that caused them to view Hitler as an ally, suppressing any thoughts or reservations concerning the

²⁶ Quoted in Albert T. Lauterbach, "Roots and Implications of the German Military Society," *Military Affairs* 5, (1941): 10.

²⁷ Guderian, 32. Guderian further writes that Beck had no understanding of modern technical matters.

²⁸ As well as by essentially tax-free "gifts" on the order of RM 250,000 for birthdays; Guderian, Keitel, and von Leeb were among those who received large estates as well. For a full discussion of Hitler's systematic use of "Prussian Field Marshal 'hush money'," see Norman J. Goda, "Black Marks: Hitler's Bribery of His Senior Officers during World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 72, (2000).

direction in which he was leading Germany. In light of this, the general's description of themselves as apolitical loses traction, suggesting that they may have over-stated the degree to which the German general staff sequestered itself from political affairs.

In addition to being apolitical, and by extension military minded, the generals portray themselves as gentleman soldiers rather than Nazis. Kesselring claims to have had little social intercourse with the Nazi Party.²⁹ Going a step further, Manstein shows contempt for the Nazi leadership. In one instance, referring to Goering's entrance into a conference with Hitler, Manstein comments, Goering "appeared to have taken it for a masked ball." He claims to have whispered to his neighbor, "I suppose Fat Boy's here as a strong-arm man?"³⁰ Manstein's apparent disdain for the pomp and pretensions of the Nazis, as compared to his own austerity, presents but one aspect of his distancing himself from the Nazis. He alludes to a sense of personal honor that was often inflamed when dealing with Hitler and the Nazis. Reporting an exchange with Hitler in which he perceived a personal insult, Manstein retorts, "all I can say to your interpretation of my motives is that *I* am a gentleman."³¹ By including this anecdote, Manstein distinguishes between himself and Hitler's ilk, in terms of his status as a gentleman. Manstein portrays his preferred way of standing up to Hitler as reaffirming his sense of honor as a gentleman, rather than expounding upon his military successes or adherence to Nazi ideology.

Kesselring explicitly claims to be a gentleman soldier, going so far as to "pledge my honor that the war, as I saw it, was conducted by us Germans with chivalry – as far as

²⁹ Kesselring, 42.

³⁰ Manstein, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 512.

this is possible in war – and with humanity.”³² What is important here are the obvious pains to which he goes to distinguish himself, if not his country, from the monstrosities of the Nazis. He maintains that the war as he saw it was conducted honorably, meaning that at least in his area of operations he strove to be a gentleman. Manstein puts this attitude succinctly in his poignant tribute to his son, who was killed in action on 30 October 1942, saying that “by the very fact of being an ardent German soldier he was at once a gentleman in the truest sense of the word – a gentleman and a Christian.”³³

Keitel at once affirms the belief in this code while also undermining its practice as he describes the institution of Hitler’s *Nacht unter Nebel* – ‘Cover of Darkness’ – decree, stating that its purpose “was to make it quite plain to all those German officers, who had been brought up in a make-believe world of ‘chivalry’ in war, that when they are faced with methods like these the only one to keep his head is the one who least shrinks from exacting the most ruthless reprisals.”³⁴ Keitel thus supports the generals’ claims of a belief in chivalry; however, he suggests that this “make-believe world” did not stand long in the face of war’s reality. At Nuremberg, Kesselring was accused of ordering his troops to carry out severe reprisals against villages harboring partisans. One such order read: “Wherever there is evidence of a considerable number of partisan groups a proportion of the male population of the area will be arrested, and in the event of an act of violence being committed these men will be shot.”³⁵ Evidently, the generals made claims to being gentlemen with the knowledge that their actions were not always so chivalrous; hence the

³² Kesselring, 48.

³³ Manstein, 271.

³⁴ Keitel, 153. Hitler’s decree came in the wake of partisan resistance in both France and the Soviet Union. He was so enraged at this resistance that he issued the slogan, “Terrorism can only be combated with terrorism.”

³⁵ Quoted in Robert Gellately, ed., *The Nuremberg Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 327.

memoirs become an apology for their character, a representation of their personal beliefs to stand in contrast to their actions.

Both Kesselring and Manstein are trying to hold onto something here, namely their sense of honor as soldiers. They respond to the dishonorable conduct of the Nazis by repeatedly using words like “gentleman” and “chivalry.” However, as Kesselring’s case suggests, their actions were more in line with the ideology of Hitler’s regime than they would like to admit. Interrogations of the generals by the Allies after the war revealed “astonishing distortions of logic.” A joint intelligence committee for the Allies’ supreme command concluded after more than 300 interviews that the generals approved of all successful acts. They juxtaposed constant discussions of honor with a “perverted moral sense” equated right and wrong with success and failure. As Antony Beevor writes, “it was, for example, wrong to persecute the Jews before the war since that set the Anglo-Americans against Germany. It would have been right to postpone the anti-Jewish campaign and begin it after Germany had won the war.”³⁶ This ambivalence toward the moral consequences of action is striking; Manstein, in explaining why he did not take part in the *coup* against Hitler, makes clear that he did not join because he thought it would fail.³⁷

But whereas generals such as Manstein and Kesselring may have experienced some cognitive dissonance between their sense of honor as soldiers and their knowledge of complicity with Hitler’s regime, they believed that they had served their country faithfully and served it very well. Specifically, Manstein and Kesselring make it clear that, as commanding generals, they were very good at what they did. Manstein writes after his

³⁶ Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 429.

³⁷ Manstein, 287-288.

account of the victory over France that “we ultimately gained a brilliant victory in the French theatre of war... [and] even if the enemy had displayed greater energy and better judgment, the ‘new’ plan would still have won the campaign.”³⁸ By “new plan,” Manstein refers to his own work in devising the surprise attack through the Ardennes forest which is credited with being decisive in the astounding defeat of the French forces in 1940. He spends no less than thirty-two pages describing his efforts in getting the original battle plan modified. The General Staff resisted Manstein’s modifications, but Hitler caught wind of the ambitious plan and met with Manstein. Convinced that Manstein’s plan would work, and pleased by an opportunity to upset the General Staff, Hitler adopted the proposed revisions.³⁹ While Manstein describes his involvement, Hitler emerges as the key figure. Without Hitler’s intervention, Manstein’s modifications would not have been adopted and the attack on France would have probably failed. Hitler enabled the generals’ success as much as he hindered it.

Kesselring even more directly defended his performance as a commanding general. During his imprisonment he apparently heard many things to the contrary, and in his memoir he set the record straight:

I am only stating a truism when I say that our performance in the war was something of an achievement, as Liddell Hart confirms. In contrast to this opinion, however, I remember different utterances and articles written by Germans referring to the “genius”, in plain language, the “idiocy” of the German High Command, according to which the German infantryman was a dragooned and pitiable creature who suffered from the treatment of his superiors and was continually bullied by them...I readily admit that mistakes were made. But as we succeeded in bringing every campaign in the first years of the war to a victorious and swift conclusion, it can only be assumed that on the Allied side still greater “ignoramuses” must have been at the helm.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-122.

⁴⁰ Kesselring, 314.

He goes on to say that the suggestion that the German military should have been organized along the same lines as the US military is “more than I can take.”⁴¹ The German generals remained proud in defeat throughout their memoirs. No doubt post-war revelations of the odds they faced in both men and materiel magnified their sense of accomplishment. In defeat the German soldier and command staffs were elevated for having performed so well against the formidable Allied powers.

Others shared the German generals’ high assessment of their military skills. As Kesselring notes, British and American authors acknowledged German military achievements. B.H. Liddell Hart claims that “the German generals of this war were the best finished product of their profession – anywhere.”⁴² From interviewing his peers Liddell Hart identifies Manstein as the “ablest commander.”⁴³ Historian Kenneth Macksey argues that Kesselring “was one of, if not the greatest, German military leader of the Second World War.”⁴⁴ This debate demonstrates what makes these memoirs so interesting and why they were translated into English: namely, there exists a fascination with the men who commanded the finest soldiers in the war, perhaps in history.⁴⁵

The “high military competence” of the generals and their troops also makes it harder to comprehend their behavior. “The generals complained constantly about the humiliations to which they were exposed, professed to despise Hitler, privately acknowledged that the war was lost. Yet, month after month, they attended the Fuhrer’s

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 314.

⁴² Liddell Hart, 300.

⁴³ Captain B.H. Liddell Hart, foreword to *Lost Victories*, by Erich von Manstein (Novato: Presidio Press 1958, 1982). 13.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Macksey foreword to *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring*, by Albrecht Kesselring (London: Greenhill Books, 1988). 8.

⁴⁵ Stephen Ambrose alludes to the claims made by several historians that the German soldier was the finest anywhere. Stephen Ambrose, introduction to *Panzer Commander*, by Hans von Luck (New York: Praeger, 1989), xxi.

military conferences...then returned to their headquarters to continue the direction of his doomed war.”⁴⁶ In his conferences, Hitler would lay out his war aims, direct and criticize his generals, and sidetrack potentially helpful discussions into the minutiae of subjects such as arms production.⁴⁷

That the generals went along with it all for so long speaks either to their patience or profound political inertia. Their minds easily switched between tactical and strategic, “big picture” aims, as their skill on the battlefield attested; yet the generals remained remarkably unmoved by the unpleasant big picture painted by Hitler’s conferences. They would later point to their great respect for the authority granted to Hitler by his position as a primary reason for their refusal to openly resist him, most notably represented by the oath of loyalty they swore to Hitler.⁴⁸

In addition, the military culture of which the generals were a part helps explain their reluctance to oppose Hitler. One author notes, “not only did Bismarck win but he taught the German people to lose confidence in themselves, as a people lacking in political capacity.” The great Field Marshal, the elder Moltke, went so far as to say, “the army is most outstanding institution in every country, for it alone makes possible the existence of all civic institutions.”⁴⁹ Coupling the two ideas, that of political inertia and the primacy of the army for stability, helps explain Manstein’s statement regarding his refusal to overthrow Hitler by violent means: “Within the scope of these war memoirs it is enough to say that as one responsible for an army group in the field I did not feel I had

⁴⁶ Max Hastings, *Armageddon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 170.

⁴⁷ Robert Gellately, ed., *The Nuremberg Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 159. Testifying to Hitler’s impressive memory, Keitel remarked that Hitler “knew the ships of every fleet in the world.” Hitler played to his strength, memory, in the face of his generals’ collective genius. See also Manstein, 274-5.

⁴⁸ Harvey A. DeWeerd, “The German Officer Corps Versus Hitler,” *Military Affairs* 13 (1949): 199. See also, Manstein, 287.

⁴⁹ Lauterbach, “Roots and Implications of German Military Society,” 4-5.

the right to contemplate a *coup d'etat* in wartime because in my own view it would have led to an immediate collapse of the front and probably to chaos inside Germany."⁵⁰

Manstein reveals a lack of faith in his political capacity, indicating that he did not consider the conspiracy against Hitler likely to succeed. And he directly links the collapse of the front to the total collapse of civil society within Germany.

Whereas the generals characterize themselves as apolitical, skilled gentlemen, Hitler gets a mixed report. Some, like Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, referred to Hitler as "that Bohemian Corporal."⁵¹ referring to Hitler's Austrian origins and his meager service during the First World War. Most generals, however, could not be as openly contemptuous of Nazism as Rundstedt, who had a commanding presence and respect that even Hitler could not challenge.⁵² As such, several perspectives on Hitler emerge from the memoirs, but none condemn him entirely or dismiss his talents. Namely, two facets of Hitler come to the fore: Hitler as the man and Hitler as the Commander-in-Chief. Hitler the man is manipulative, intelligent, even a genius, but often unpredictably bipolar in his dealings. That is, he fluctuates between raving madman and a captivating, almost seductive listener. As Commander-in-Chief, unsurprisingly the generals are less forgiving towards this amateur who as the war progressed increasingly overruled their decisions and suggestions. Keitel, in particular, stresses Hitler's supreme authority in directing the military operations of the war as a way of deflecting culpability for the outcome of many operations.

⁵⁰ Manstein, 287.

⁵¹ Hart, 74.

⁵² Gellately, 167. Keitel testifies that Hitler had great respect for Rundstedt's ability.

With respect to Hitler the man, Manstein provides an in-depth account. He finds Hitler to be a procrastinator and averse to risk-taking,⁵³ traits one might be surprised to discover in the man responsible for the Nazis astounding rise to power. He admits that on occasions Hitler lost all self-control, but assesses stories of foaming at the mouth to be beyond his experience. In describing Hitler's ability as a good listener and objective discussant (interestingly adding "on occasion") Manstein provides a keen insight into what may have been the key to Hitler's manipulative powers:

Hitler obviously sensed just how far he could afford to go with his interlocutor and what people he could hope to intimidate with outbursts of rage that may often have been simulated...Hitler has a masterly knack of psychologically adapting himself to the individual whom he wished to bring round to his point of view. His faculty for inspiring others with his own confidence – whether feigned or genuine – was quite remarkable.⁵⁴

Kesselring had similar experiences, falling under Hitler's spell. He writes admiringly, "Hitler received me at any hour of the night, listened to what I had to say without once interrupting me, showed great understanding for any questions I raised and nearly always made his decision on the lines I proposed."⁵⁵ Clearly, Hitler had found the key to manipulation. Most people welcome the chance to be heard, feeling their views were receiving well-deserved respect. Having the Fuhrer personally invested in what one has to say is a powerful intoxicant indeed. Keitel agreed, "That was one of his greatest abilities – his power to convince others by speech."⁵⁶ One young general, Manteuffel referred to the effect as "magnetic" and "hypnotic."⁵⁷

⁵³ The following discussion comes from Manstein, 273-288.

⁵⁴ Manstein, 285.

⁵⁵ Kesselring, 264.

⁵⁶ As quoted in Gellately, *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 167.

⁵⁷ As reported by B.H. Liddell Hart in *The German Generals Talk*, 296.

While granting Hitler these traits, Manstein draws one critical line between himself and his Fuhrer. Manstein was a gentleman who cared for his troops. From the beginning of his memoir to the end, Manstein consistently praises the German soldier and feels a connection with them.⁵⁸ In a telling condemnation, revealing as much about himself as Hitler, Manstein observes: “I still never had the feeling that his heart belonged to the fighting troops. Losses, as far as he was concerned, were merely figures which reduced fighting power. They are unlikely to have seriously disturbed him as a human being.”⁵⁹ These two images of Hitler – as a hypnotic, master manipulator who was nonetheless detached from the destruction he was causing – represented how the memoirs portray Hitler. Such representations also reflect two things about how the generals wanted to present themselves. First, they were manipulated by Hitler’s magnetic personality. Held under his sway, they might be excused for following him. Second, they diverged sharply from Hitler insofar as their humanity sensitized them to the destruction they were causing and its cost in blood.

As for Hitler the commander, “all the disasters of the German Army were attributed to Hitler; all its successes were credited to the German General Staff.” But, Liddell Hart continues, “that picture is not true, though there is some truth in it.”⁶⁰ This assessment summarizes the generals’ account of Hitler. They are quick to illustrate where Hitler’s interventions caused some calamity and do not shy away from pointing out where their own suggestions might have avoided it. Discussing the defense of Italy in the winter of 1944-1945, Kesselring describes Hitler as giving direct orders to units under his command, and then failing to follow-up on his circumvention of Kesselring in any

⁵⁸ Manstein, 548.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 281.

⁶⁰ Liddell Hart, 3.

significant fashion.⁶¹ Indeed, Manstein credits Hitler's failure to recognize the rule that one can never be too strong at the crucial point by diluting his strategic aims, leading to the initial failure of the campaign against Russia.⁶² Instead, Manstein argues, Hitler relied on his force of will to carry the day. Hitler believed that the power of his will would transcend the Wehrmacht, "down to the youngest private soldier," and ensure the correctness of his orders.⁶³ Guderian, who inherited the unenviable task of serving as the Chief of Staff near the end of the war, reports many such instances when Hitler would simply balk at any suggestion made by the army generals, taking criticisms personally.⁶⁴

The picture emerges of a supreme commander who grew ever more distant from his generals and relied upon his own genius to guide the war effort. Hitler's interventions are also portrayed as the reasons for some of the German military's greater blunders. Manstein blames Hitler's intervention for the British escape at Dunkirk; he describes Hitler's dithering over Operation Sealion – the plan to invade the British Isles – as "his big error of judgment."⁶⁵ Additionally, Manstein details his attempts to persuade Hitler to appoint a Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Front and give up most of his oversight powers.⁶⁶ Not coincidentally, Manstein was also the general considered by most to be ideal for the job.⁶⁷ Hitler preserved the powers for himself, resulting in the fatal stalling of the counter-attack against the Kursk salient for several weeks in 1943.⁶⁸

Consequently, there is truth to the claim that Hitler was responsible for some of the major failures of the German armed forces. His designation of "fortress" towns led to

⁶¹ Kesselring, 207, 221.

⁶² Manstein, 276.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁶⁴ Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 89.

⁶⁵ Manstein, 130, 170.

⁶⁶ Manstein, 505.

⁶⁷ Liddell Hart, 65.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

the suicidal sacrifice of thousands of his troops.⁶⁹ His appointment of Himmler to the command of an armored corps in January 1945 shows that his distrust of the German officer corps was almost complete. He even threatened Guderian with smashing “the general staff system,” revenging himself on a “group of intellectuals” who presumed to “press their views upon their superiors.”⁷⁰ That Hitler distrusted the German officer corps and intervened frequently in their plans is beyond dispute, but blaming Hitler for strategic mistakes too easily shifts responsibility. As historian Robert Citino shows, the generals “designed and launched some terrible operations.” Manstein blames Hitler for the failure at Kursk; in fact, it was a “lumbering strike against the most obvious spot on the map,” showing little imagination.⁷¹ Blaming Hitler allows the generals to remain proud in defeat, preserving a sense of honor that proceeds from success.

Finally, we must note the generals’ preponderant detailing of the operational aspects of warfare. Stefan T. Possony, reviewing Manstein’s memoir for the journal *Military Affairs*, writes that “Manstein concentrates almost exclusively on the operational aspects of the military art. There is some awareness of logistics, but technology and intelligence are barely mentioned; certainly these factors are not discussed with insight.”⁷² Indeed, Manstein’s discussion of the war reads like a blow-by-blow account, discussing where an army corps was assigned, the resistance it encountered, and what kind of air cover it received. To illustrate, a typical excerpt of Manstein’s account of his campaign to take the Crimean peninsula in 1941-1942 reads thus:

The attack *in the north* was to be carried out by 54 Corps, comprising 22, 24, 50, and 132 Infantry Divisions (commanded by

⁶⁹ Beevor, 91.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁷¹ Robert Citino, *The German Way of Warfare* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 269.

⁷² Stefan T. Possony, Review of *Lost Victories*, in *Military Affairs* 23 no. 1 (1959), 42.

Generals Wolff, Baron v. Tettau, Schmidt and Lindemann) and a reinforced 213 Infantry Regiment. The corps' orders were to keep its forces rigidly concentrated in the main direction of assault on the high ground north of the eastern part of Severnaya Bay. All parts of the fortified zone by-passed in the first instance were to be pinned down with a view to taking as many of them as possible from the rear later on. The left wing of the corps was to gain possession of the heights of Gaytany and the ground to the south-east of the latter in order to clear the way for the Rumanian Mountain Corps' subsequent advance further south.⁷³

This kind of description is good for someone looking at a map or trying to create an in-depth account of the attack on the fortress of Sevastopol. But it reveals little else about the author or the war except what army corps was ordered to do what and when.

Kesselring likewise provides an interesting account of his own involvement in the war, but still sticks to operational issues.⁷⁴ This focus on the operational aspects by Manstein and Kesselring may reflect the limits of their experience. That is, as commanding generals they would have been supported by a group of staff officers who could take care of issues such as logistics. This may reflect the peculiar command style that historians like Robert Citino attribute to the German Army, namely that of *Auftragstaktik*.⁷⁵ This command style involved the commanding general issuing broad directives that were then translated down the chain of command, growing more specific as one got closer to the platoon level. This resulted in lower-rank officers, who were also the ones leading the soldiers into battle, gaining a significant amount of leeway in how they achieved an objective. This issue will be discussed in detail later, but it may help explain why the generals discuss the war the way that they do.

Moreover, the generals have peculiarly shifted the discussion of the war through their memoirs, especially with respect to the war against the Soviet Union, into a

⁷³ Manstein, 243-244.

⁷⁴ For a typical example, see Kesselring, 94-95.

⁷⁵ Citino, 308.

discussion of how they almost won the war. Citino points out that from the memoirs of generals such as Manstein and Guderian, in particular, “a strange view of the war in the east arose, focusing almost exclusively on the German point of view and asking repeatedly how the German army could have won.”⁷⁶ As has been pointed out earlier, the generals portray themselves as very good at their craft and contrast themselves with Hitler, highlighting the poor results of his interference. Hitler’s meddling and follies have been prime suspects in the case for why the Germans lost. Indeed, since “Hitler proved to be a supreme commander who intervened not just in operational details, such as placement of reserves, but who regularly sent directives to lower tactical units about deployment of their light mortars,”⁷⁷ Guderian and the other generals have a perfect scapegoat. Manstein draws particular attention to the absence of meddling by Hitler in his campaign to capture the Crimean peninsula, a victory which earned him his field marshal’s baton.⁷⁸ This explicit distinction between the Crimean campaign, which was carried out free of interference from Hitler’s Supreme Command, and most other campaigns, which were not so freely commanded, provides a crucial example how the German generals talk about the war. Manstein implies that other campaigns might have been as thoroughly successful as the Crimean campaign had other generals, and Manstein himself, been able to operate without Hitler’s incessant interference. Thus he makes explicit the prevalence and ill-effects of Hitler’s meddling, noting “we often thought nostalgically of our days in the Crimea, when we had been able to fight in a theatre all of our own.”⁷⁹ Instead, as Kesselring notes, Hitler’s insistent involvement in the minutest

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁷⁸ Manstein, 204.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 285.

details led to “overstrain” and “snap decisions with their frequently horrible, inhuman consequences.”⁸⁰

Finally, one is left with the issues that the generals do not address in their memoirs. Obviously, there is little discussion of potentially incriminating issues such the widespread execution of German soldiers by summary court martial⁸¹, the roles of the Waffen SS in war crimes, or the existence of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Gerhard Weinberg notes that no general deals with the Wehrmacht’s execution of German soldiers.⁸² In fact, Manstein does, maintaining that it is the grave responsibility of a supreme commander of an army to sentence to death soldiers for acts of cowardice or actions leading to the death of other soldiers. But Manstein stresses that he always examined the case files himself before agreeing with the recommended punishment. He presents two cases. In one, two soldiers raped and killed an old woman, and he had no qualms about executing them. However, in another case, a medal-winning soldier lost his nerve in battle; but rather than sentence the man to death, in what the reader is supposed to construe as even-handedness, Manstein commutes the sentence for four weeks to allow the soldier to recover his honor.⁸³ Manstein does not question whether the military code employed by the German Army was too strict, but uses this example to demonstrate his own generosity and fairness as a commander.

More importantly, the generals fail to address the war as if they were the aggressors. In all the ways that they present themselves and the war, they fail to acknowledge their own involvement in a war of aggressive expansion. One might expect

⁸⁰ Kesselring, 180.

⁸¹ Beevor, 131. Referred to as the *Fliegende Standgericht*, this mobile drumhead courts martial’s guiding principle was “The Justice of mercy is not applicable.”

⁸² Weinberg, 374.

⁸³ Manstein, 221-222.

that, even if they agreed with Hitler's decisions to declare war on Poland, France, the USSR, et al. there might be some discussion of their own perceptions of the pros and cons of these engagements. There are some protestations of not wanting war⁸⁴, but these are overwhelmed comparatively by the space devoted to describing their skill in war.

Moreover, the generals do offer some indication of support for the war, chiefly in terms of solving the "Polish Question." The Treaty of Versailles was seen to have severely weakened Germany and deprived it of lands, especially where Poland had contributed to the "mutilation of the Fatherland."⁸⁵ The desire to reincorporate areas that were predominantly German in population or were considered to be traditionally German lands dated back to the 1920s and 1930s: not surprisingly then, Hitler drew upon this sentiment as a pretense to launch his war of expansion.⁸⁶

In surveying the memoirs of the German generals, several important themes emerge. The generals characterize themselves as apolitical, professional gentlemen. They were very good at their craft and won many victories for Germany. In this sense they are patriotic and unapologetic. They portray Hitler as manipulative and slightly mad, leading him to interfere in military planning to Germany's detriment. The war itself is dealt with in a very detached tone, with the generals recounting mostly operational aspects of the war and highlighting their individual victories. They afford little place then for discussion of the less savory and incriminating issues of the war: indeed, the generals fail to countenance, either intentionally or not, the severe costs of the Second World War on the populations of Europe. They construct an image of themselves as apolitical, professional

⁸⁴ Kesselring, 41-42; Manstein, 26-27.

⁸⁵ Manstein, 24.

⁸⁶ Manstein, 26.

soldiers fighting honorably for their country. The problems with this image will become apparent in Chapter three.

Chapter 2

Frontsoldaten – Experiences of the Common Soldier

“Generals have since written accounts of these events. locating particular catastrophes, and summarizing in a sentence, or a few lines, the losses. but they never, to my knowledge, give sufficient expression to the wretchedness of soldiers abandoned to a fate one would wish to spare even the most miserable cur.”¹ Thus laments Guy Sajer in his memoir *The Forgotten Soldier*, distinguishing between the accounts of the Second World War as they appear in the memoirs of generals and how the common soldier experienced the war. In describing the operational aspects of the war, the German generals certainly cover in one sentence events that might have seemed an eternity to the soldiers on the front. Indeed, one might infer from Manstein’s account of the capture of the Crimea that by November 16, 1941 there was a lull in the fighting²; yet Gottlob Bidermann’s narrative describes relentless counterattacks by the Russians.³ Such variance in experience of the war translates into the memoirs. Although technology opened up new modes of warfare, the armies of WWII, like WWI, relied heavily on conscripted manpower.⁴ Thus the common soldiers reveal concerns mirroring those of their First World War counterparts. Likewise, they faced the problem of telling the story of an ultimately fruitless war, one that had consumed their entire early manhood and many of their friends. In asking the same three questions – how do they describe themselves, Hitler and the war – of the common soldiers’ memoirs, one finds their experiences increasingly marked by attempts to recoup some of their loss through descriptions of

¹ Guy Sajer, *The Forgotten Soldier* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 215-216.

² Manstein, 220.

³ Gottlob Bidermann, *In Deadly Combat* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 62.

⁴ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 133.

camaraderie and traumatic experiences, as well as an alienation from and victimization by Nazism through its blatant disregard for their lives.

According to Dennis Showalter, Gottlob Bidermann's narrative is structured by a set of cultural and intellectual conventions vastly different from his US and British counterparts, who tend to describe a "good war." Showalter criticizes a tendency among historians to interpret the conventions of German war memoirs as expressing militarism and proto-fascism, suggesting a prejudice exists for memoirs that reveal betrayal and disillusionment. He wants to shed these prejudices and interpret Bidermann's memoir as a simple account written for his fellow soldiers.⁵ Bidermann would certainly appreciate Showalter's help in this regard, but his narrative, like those of his fellow soldiers, *does* reveal militaristic and proto-fascist elements. The German soldiers grew up in a society that honored militarism, in an era marked by proto-fascism.⁶ General Friedrich von Bernhardi remarked prior to the First World War: "War is not merely a necessary element in the life of nations, but an indispensable factor of culture, in which a truly civilized nation finds the highest expression of strength and vitality."⁷ As Lauterbach notes, the proto-fascist "infusion of collectivist mass movement ideas" as adopted by the Nazis allowed them to realize ideas such as Bernhardi's in a militarized Germany society in the 1930s and 1940s.⁸ One soldier remarked, "my father encouraged me to join the army because that is how a man grows up."⁹ As Showalter says, the soldiers' memoirs were written within the conventions of their time. Militarism and proto-fascism were dominant

⁵ Dennis Showalter, introduction to *In Deadly Combat*, by Gottlob Bidermann (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 2-3.

⁶ As Azar Gat shows, in *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War*

⁷ Quoted in Albert T. Lauterbach, "Roots and Implications of the German Military Society," *Military Affairs* 5, (1941): 5.

⁸ Lauterbach, 18-20.

⁹ Max Hastings, *Armageddon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 168.

cultural and intellectual conventions at the time and emerge as unifying threads among the various topics the soldiers discuss.

Like the generals, the common soldier, or Landser, did not think of himself as a Nazi; rather, he considers himself an ordinary German soldier fighting for his country. Siegfried Knappe begins by relating, “Those of us who were soldiers in the German Army during World War II were young men fighting for their country. We were not ‘Nazi’ soldiers; we were just German soldiers. This is the story of one of them.”¹⁰ From the start one finds an interest in distinguishing one’s service from the less savory elements of the war. Looking for some way to hold the memory of their service in the war in a positive light, many soldiers treat Nazism as something that was happening concurrently but not as their motivation for war. Patriotism was their highest motivation. Bidermann admits, “we were bound to our duty by the oath we had sworn as soldiers of Germany; to swear, with weapons in hand, to defend our country even to the sacrifice of our lives.”¹¹ As in the case of the generals, they fall back on the honor of soldiering in Germany society as a basis for pride in their experience. In effect, they suggest no alternative existed to joining the war effort. German society, with its century long connection between nationalism and militarism, demanded nothing less.¹² This is certainly understandable, and it is likely that many soldiers joined the army – or were, in most cases, conscripted – without necessarily embracing the ideology driving the war.

More importantly, the way that the common soldiers characterize themselves presents a dual role, as historian Stephen Fritz calls it, of perpetrator and victim.¹³ He

¹⁰ Siegfried Knappe, *Soldat*, trans. Ted Brusaw (New York: Orion Books, 1992), ix.

¹¹ Bidermann, 228.

¹² Lauterbach, 20.

¹³ Stephen Fritz, *Frontsoldaten* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 3.

explains: "As perpetrators, whether out of conviction or not, these common men existed as part of a great destructive machine, ready and willing to kill and destroy in order to achieve the goals of a murderous regime. In the role of victims, they lived daily with the physical hardships...and crushing anxieties of death and killing that constitute the everyday life of all combat soldiers."¹⁴ Keeping this dual role in mind helps reconcile the varying elements found within the soldiers' memoirs. At times, they seem very proud to serve in the army, as many young men might, and echo the party line when referring to the "Jewish conspiracy."¹⁵ Especially during the early parts of the war, while the German Army won victory after victory, morale remained high and questioning low. Here they most strongly fit the role of perpetrator. Some, like Bruno Manz's friend Helmut, never lose their fervor, becoming neo-Nazis after the war.¹⁶ But as the war wears on, the enthusiasm so apparent early in the memoirs fades as the realities of war, and the sinking feeling of imminent defeat, become overpowering. After the attempt on Hitler's life on July 20, 1944, Bidermann writes that "the aura of the Fuhrer was destroyed."¹⁷ Here they are more clearly the victims, "praying for an end to the conflagration into which so many millions had been thrust."¹⁸

In the 1950s, West Germans expanded the victim hood of the soldiers to include the millions of expellees from East Germany and the more than three million Germans who spent time in Soviet POW camps. West Germans asserted their victim status while distancing themselves from National Socialism by focusing on the crimes committed against Germans by the Soviet Red Army. A moral equivalence arose between the

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁵ Bruno Manz, *A Mind in Prison* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2000), 106.

¹⁶ Manz, 101.

¹⁷ Bidermann, 227.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 226.

suffering of the Jews at the hands of the Germans and that of the Germans at the hands of the Soviets, resulting in an “account of National Socialism in which Nazi crimes were committed by a handful of fanatics who did not truly represent the German people. In the rhetoric of the 1950s, Jews and other had suffered extraordinary losses, but so too had Germans.”¹⁹ The memoirs do not lend themselves directly to such a narrative; while they do suggest Hitler hijacked a legitimate war effort, nowhere do they treat the Holocaust as equivalent to their own suffering. The Holocaust remains a unique event and a great source of shame and discomfort. Their own suffering takes on the tone of a loss of innocence or wasted youth. Sadness, not justification, characterizes the tone. And yet, it remains easy to see how others in the 1950s might have incorporated the ordinary soldiers’ accounts into the larger narrative of German suffering.

Enthusiasm, rather than war weariness, characterizes the early chapters of most soldiers’ memoirs. The men who marched off to war were young and proud, equipped with new uniforms and cutting edge technology. Siegfried Knappe describes an excitement about the war that would later be disabused by reality, because he “was young and [his] nationalistic fervor was high.”²⁰ Guy Sajer describes the early experiences of the war, commenting, “we live with an intensity I have never before experienced. I have a brand-new uniform... [and] am very proud of my appearance.”²¹ This emphasis on patriotism and a desire for excitement and adventure reinforces the image that these were not men motivated to fight for Hitler’s *Lebensraum*.²² Here the German soldiers resemble

¹⁹ Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 3-4.

²⁰ Knappe, 131.

²¹ As quoted in Fritz, 11.

²² Translates “living-room.” Hitler’s idea was to resettle the Ukraine and Russia with Germans so that Germany may further exert its dominance in Europe.

their American, British, and Russian counterparts: they are filled with purpose and an anticipation that can only accompany those who have not experienced war. Sajer extends this point, describing his almost tragic ignorance: “There was the war, and I married it because there was nothing else when I reached the age of falling in love.”²³ While the impact of explicit Nazism is diminished, the soldiers’ initial anticipation of the war reflects the militarized society of which they were a part.

Eager though they were, as the war ground on they emphasized the close bonds that emerged through their shared experience of cataclysm. Surrounded by death, their personal thoughts take on a much more somber tone. Describing the death of a comrade, Bidermann writes:

The thoughts of those gathered nearby remained deeply personal, and one could not escape feeling an intense pity for our brother in the gray tunic who had been struck; yet with these thoughts each man turned to concentrate upon himself, about how he could be the next to fall, the next to meet his destiny in Russia. We became at times possessed by these thoughts, as helpless against them as against the death that had quickly enveloped our brother soldier. Thus began the realization that we were being consumed by this foreign land.²⁴

Feeling a close connection to the other soldiers through the use of the word “brother,” Bidermann shows the transformation from enthusiastic soldiers with new uniforms to haunted, self-possessed men fearing that they might die in a foreign land. The concentration on a single, individual death stands in contrast to impersonal war in which they were caught up. Knappe also recorded in detail his first experience of loss:

I shed tears for a friend in the still darkness of that night. Death had hovered nearby for some time, but this was the first time it had touched me so closely...Rehberg would not go home. Ever. He had vanished from the face of the earth. He had been a friend, and his death brought the utter

²³ Sajer, ix.

²⁴ Bidermann, 52.

destructiveness of war home to me as nothing else could have....Combat meant having the lives of those you cared for snuffed out in an instant.²⁵

Here they assume their roles as victims, thrust into a miserable existence of bitter cold, poor food, and unrelenting death.²⁶

Tied to their gradual disillusionment are the common soldiers' views on Hitler. Initially, they recognize him as the leader of Germany, trusting and following him. A soldier joining the army at eighteen years of age in 1938 would have largely grown up under the Nazis, having experienced nothing different. Hitler was the legitimate leader and it is hardly surprising that ordinary soldiers trusted him. Many Germans desired the authority and security provided by older systems which had been undone by revolution; Hitler and fascism directly addressed this need.²⁷ He had "brought political and economic stability to Germany, which appealed greatly to the average German...[and] he had reunited a German people who had been divided by literally dozens of political parties during the democratic Weimar Republic."²⁸ Having grown up hearing about the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles, Hitler inspired their confidence by remilitarizing the Rhineland, rebuilding the armed forces, annexing Austria and taking over the Sudetenland all without firing a shot. Hitler's successes, Knappe writes, "made us extremely proud to be young German officers, and I am sure he sensed that pride in us."²⁹ Hitler's popularity soared with this restoration of national pride. As the "idol of

²⁵ Knappe, 156.

²⁶ Fritz, 5.

²⁷ Howard, 118.

²⁸ Knappe, 331.

²⁹ Knappe, 124-125.

millions.” the soldiers of the Wehrmacht followed Hitler with “blind and unquestioning faith.”³⁰

But the young soldiers of the Wehrmacht followed Hitler into war willingly and enthusiastically. Hitler’s foolishness as a military commander, the gradual knowledge that the war would be lost, and the attempt on Hitler’s life prompt increasingly severe indictments. During and after the defeat at Stalingrad, Hitler adopted a (non)strategy of never retreating; and any officer reporting a position untenable risked being charged with defeatism. Knappe describes Hitler’s decision to prevent the Sixth Army from escaping Stalingrad through a retreat as “sheer stupidity.” Knappe attributes this and other errors in military decisions not to the generals but, “these remarkably stupid military errors were undoubtedly due to Hitler – a man with no military training or experience above the rank of *gefreiter* – taking over the day-to-day operation of the German Army.”³¹ Knappe laments that “it hurt my pride to see such a fine professional army being wasted by the inept leadership of a man with no military training, knowledge, or experience...[and] I was becoming bitter...about Hitler’s cruel and stupid order to die rather than retreat and regroup – as were many others in the Army.”³²

Hitler certainly wasted a “fine and professional” army, one that had been taught to take pride in itself. At Stalingrad and later battles, it was slowly devastated by Hitler’s increasing military control. Knappe’s reference to Hitler having no military knowledge and only having attained the rank of “*gefreiter*” recalls the disdainful way in which some German generals such as von Rundstedt referred to Hitler as the “bohemian corporal.” In both the generals’ and soldiers’ memoirs, one sees an increasing disillusionment with

³⁰ Bidermann, 227; Knappe, 333.

³¹ Knappe, 224. A *gefreiter* is the German equivalent to the private first class in the US Army.

³² *Ibid*, 225.

Hitler as his control over the war effort steadily brings them to inevitable defeat. Particularly after Stalingrad, when Hitler adopted his strategy of never-retreating, the sacrifice of men and materiel occurred at such an absurd rate that Hitler's deficiencies became overpowering. Knappe bristles, "Hitler's incredibly stupid orders to stand and fight to the last man, even though it meant the wholesale slaughter of young German men, instead of intelligently retreating to regroup and fight again."³³ This murderous strategy produced severe discontent in the army. It also fed another aspect of German victim hood, namely that Germany had been victimized by a "Nazi regime run amok."³⁴ In the same way that the collapse of the Eastern Front produced countless victims at the hands of the Soviets, so too Hitler's disastrous management of the war victimized the soldiers.

Obviously, however, Knappe could not have called anything Hitler did "incredibly stupid" either out loud or in writing during the war or else he would have been immediately court-martialed. The soldiers fought to the end out of fear of summary execution and the knowledge of what would happen should the Soviets reach Germany. As quickly as Hitler's successes garnered him loyalty, his failures brought discontent. Yet Bidermann highlights the irony of the situation that could not have escaped most soldiers:

The Soviets adopted the tactics of the Wehrmacht, and those advantages that were inherent in our military system were put to effective use by the Red Army. In contrast, the leaders in Berlin sacrificed immense numbers of soldiers to the same "hold at any cost" mentality that had almost brought the Soviet army to ruin in 1941. The tables had turned; Hitler obstinately refused to yield ground to enhance our strategic situation... The leadership of armies by political appointees, which had proven to be a hindrance to the effectiveness of the Soviet army, was demonstrated on an ever-increasing scale in the Wehrmacht. In the face of adversity and military setback, Hitler's reliance on politically loyal officers to oversee

³³ Knappe, 226.

³⁴ Moeller, *War Stories*, 173.

unwise, and at time absurd, policies began to mirror that of the Stalinist army in the prewar years.³⁵

The obvious discontent with which the soldiers viewed Hitler's leadership was only increased by his use of political appointees. As generals such as Manstein began to stand up against Hitler and his illogical war policies, they were successively sacked and replaced by more loyal and pliable leaders. Especially in the year 1944 and onward, as the war turned decisively against the Germans, the soldiers would have seen the officers who had previously led them to victory replaced by Hitler's favorites.³⁶ While the kind of criticism of Hitler seen in Bidermann and Knappe's memoirs could certainly never have been recorded during the war years, Hitler's detrimental effect on the war, despite all the propaganda he could muster, must have been apparent to the soldiers. The use of fear tactics and the existence of roving courts-martial to summarily execute soldiers accused of desertion suggests dissatisfaction with Hitler's leadership of the war became a serious problem. Importantly, this discussion of Hitler's mistakes takes on the tone of "how the Germans might have won." Taking just one example, Bidermann discusses the strategy for the siege of Leningrad, pointing out "vital mistakes" and bemoaning the loss of resources that the Wehrmacht could never make good.³⁷

Finally, on the subject of Hitler, it is worth pointing out the particular nicknames given to Hitler and Nazi officials by the soldiers. High ranking Nazi officials were referred to as "Golden Pheasants" because their uniforms resembled the breast colors of a male pheasant.³⁸ This derogatory term found its way into the civilian population, and as

³⁵ Bidermann, 117.

³⁶ Manstein, for example, was replaced by Walther Model, a loyal Nazi.

³⁷ Bidermann, 156. For more on Hitler's conduct of the war, see Robert Citino, *The German Way of Warfare*, 269, and Max Hastings, *Armageddon*, 170-171.

³⁸ Bidermann, 327.

the war dragged on, the term carried more significance as the rationed diet of the civilians contrasted with the full diet of Nazi officials.³⁹ Additionally, Hitler, as he assumed more direct control of the army, was referred to as the “Grofaz,” which was an acronym for “Grossten Feldherr Aller Zeiten,” translates “Greatest Warlord of all Time.” Bruno Manz’s first encounter with the term was in the company of “disillusioned officers,” and like the term “Golden Pheasant,” it quickly found its way into civilian use.⁴⁰ Bidermann also used the term with irony to describe Hitler’s demented control of the war effort, and Knappe recalled using the term sarcastically at the end of the war as defeat became imminent.⁴¹

In the Landsers’ discussion of the war, the predominance of the Treaty of Versailles is immediately in their justifications for the war. The Nazis fed the public perception, existing in Germany and internationally, that Germany had been abused in the treaty, that it had been used for revenge and was a result of the international Jewish conspiracy.⁴² Knappe recalls a conversation with a Major Raake who summarizes the feeling among many soldiers that “Germany cannot regain the position it should have in Europe without war, because our enemies in the West will not permit it.”⁴³ Raake even “consoled” Knappe after the death of this friend Rehberg, saying “Leutnant Rehberg’s life is one price we have to pay to restore Germany to its rightful position in Europe.”⁴⁴ The idea of German superiority had existed well before the First World War. Kept alive by the intelligentsia, the Nazis intensified this sense of superiority and isolation. Indeed,

³⁹ Beevor, 39.

⁴⁰ Manz, 179-181.

⁴¹ Bidermann, 152; Knappe, 19.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7-9.

⁴³ Knappe, 155.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

there was a feeling that Germany was surrounded by potential enemies, and that its borders, along with its ability to defend itself, had been unjustly weakened by the Treaty of Versailles.⁴⁵ In following Hitler into war, Manz claims, most Germans merely wanted “deliverance from the injustice and suppression of the Treaty of Versailles.”⁴⁶

Hitler’s actions prior to the invasion of Poland were thus well received by the average Landser. Knappe felt that the occupation of the Sudetenland had “righted a wrong” of the Treaty of Versailles.⁴⁷ Believing that Austria had been annexed by plebiscite and that Sudeten and Polish ethnic Germans were being mistreated, Knappe writes that “we invaded Poland to regain the Danzig and Polish Corridor which were taken from us by the Treaty of Versailles.”⁴⁸ Even after the invasion of Poland, the Landsers felt that they were only redressing wrongs that had been dealt to their Fatherland. They had been training for over three years, and with these resentments and a favorable cultural view of warfare, there was little argument when the Landsers were called forth to muster for war. The redress of the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles is repeatedly set forth as a legitimate war aim.

Invading Poland to reclaim “German” territory did not trouble the Landsers overmuch, nor did attacking their historic foe France to preempt an invasion into their homeland. But in the case of invading the Soviet Union, reactions were more mixed. Knappe reveals the trust in the Fuhrer that accompanied the Landsers in the beginning years of the war, admitting, “although I was deeply troubled about invading a country

⁴⁵ Fritz, 237.

⁴⁶ Manz, 272.

⁴⁷ Knappe, 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 124, 132.

with which we had a friendship treaty. I assumed that there were things I did not know."⁴⁹ But if Knappe worried about violating a friendship treaty, Nazi propaganda had so whipped up hatred against the Soviets that fear of Bolshevism led many to ally with fascism, blinding them to the international threat posed by fascism.⁵⁰ Bidermann described the operation to capture the Crimean peninsula as "liberation."⁵¹ Indeed, even before reaching the Crimea, Bidermann expresses relief that "we were experiencing firsthand the effects of Communism and that what we were hearing could not simply be attributed to our own propaganda."⁵² The Landsers had been persuaded that the invasion of the Soviet Union was justified, that the Soviet people desired freedom from the shackles of Communism. Knappe, and others, believed the Nazis' rhetoric of liberation. Thus Knappe states: "we had hated the concept of communism and felt that the Soviet government was cruelly subjugating the Soviet people."⁵³

There seemed to be little guilt in the memoirs over starting the war, except in places where the authors describe their reactions to postwar revelations regarding the atrocities committed by Hitler's regime.⁵⁴ They saw legitimate war aims in the undoing of the Treaty of Versailles and the war against Bolshevism's threat. Though he claimed not to have known the "full extent" of the orders for the liquidation of the Jews, Bidermann felt betrayed as the Nazi system "continued to distance itself further from a humanitarian waging of the war."⁵⁵ Here they recognize their complicity in the war crimes committed by Hitler, as they were the instruments of his perverse and evil design.

⁴⁹ Knappe, 176.

⁵⁰ Howard, 119.

⁵¹ Bidermann, 92.

⁵² *Ibid*, 14.

⁵³ Knappe, 298.

⁵⁴ Knappe, 298; Manz devotes his entire memoir to documenting the systematic hoodwinking he fell prey to; further discussion here needed.

⁵⁵ Bidermann, 153.

But notably they see themselves as instruments, rather than co-conspirators. Manz believes he was mentally overpowered by Nazi propaganda and power, deflecting responsibility for his actions to youth and ignorance. At least in this sense, however, the Landsers are more honest than the generals, who avoid the questions of war-guilt altogether.⁵⁶ Yet the Landsers were led to war believing in their cause, and reconceptualizing their suffering in light of the Nazi's atrocities did not come easy. One passage from Knappe's memoir may be emblematic in its honesty:

War is a calculated risk, with a winner and loser. I could understand the penalties we had to pay for losing. But we had thought of our participation in the war as noble and honorable. Now we could only be ashamed that our noble venture to right the injustices of the Versailles Treaty and regain what we thought of as rightfully ours had led to the inhuman horrors of extermination camps. There is no way to rationalize attempting to exterminate a whole race of people...I was sickened by this news.⁵⁷

The news he refers to is the revelations by the Russians as to the extent of the concentration/death camp system found in Germany and Poland. No doubt these revelations were used to lower the morale of the Germans soldiers in their post-war prisoner camps, which both Bidermann and Knappe experienced. This passage is otherwise quite telling. The ambivalence towards war itself is clear, described as a "calculated risk" like anyone would take. Other words stick out, such as "noble and honorable" employed to describe his participation in the war, along with regarding the war as a "noble venture." These are not the words one would use to describe a venture one regrets. One may infer that Knappe is faithfully recording the feelings he experienced shortly after the end of the war, and that he did not feel the need to censure his emotions with post-war revision. Even so, he only feels ashamed at the revelations of the death

⁵⁶ See discussion of this issue in chapter one.

⁵⁷ Knappe, 332. Compare with Kesselring, 314.

camps. He feels no regret for the war itself, only that Germany lost and he was used in Hitler's plot to exterminate the Jews. In this sense, Hitler hijacked the "noble venture to right the injustices of the Versailles Treaty," twisting it for his own perverted purposes, and in turn victimizing those German soldiers who went to war for their homeland.

While the reasons for the war inform the memoirs, the actual content of the memoirs largely deals with everyday events. Mundane concerns of the Landsers, such as the quality of the food on a certain day, whether or not the truck started, or who told a good joke and who died, are the central topics of discussion. Like the generals dealing with the operational aspects of the war, the Landsers fill much of their memoirs describing simply what happened day to day.⁵⁸ Vivid accounts of combat punctuate this chronology, providing moments of intense storytelling. Each author recounts the first man they killed or the first death in their platoon. "I can remember very distinctly the first deaths I encountered in the war," wrote Sajer. "The thousands upon thousands which followed are blurred and faceless: a vast cumulative nightmare."⁵⁹ Bidermann agreed: "Despite having observed death many times over the past months, I unknowingly remained a novice as yet to the true brutality and horror of war. I could never at the time have imagined that in the months and years to come I would become benumbed to death."⁶⁰ This loss of innocence links the memoirs thematically, while also presenting a unique problem. By comparison, Allied soldiers experienced many of the same horrors as did the Germans; however, they placed these memories within the context of the "Good War." History afforded the Landser no such salve.

⁵⁸ Bruno Manz exists as a notable exception. His memoir takes the form of a systematic essay showing how events in his life led to the "imprisonment of his mind" in Nazi ideology, and day to day life is the vehicle for this evolution.

⁵⁹ As quoted in Fritz, 35.

⁶⁰ Bidermann, 30.

The intimate, horrifying nature of warfare resonates throughout the memoirs. Robert Moeller wrote that the accomplishment of Jorg Friedrich in *Der Brand: Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940-1945* ('The Conflagration: Germany in the Bombing war 1940-1945') was "to provide powerful descriptions of the face of mass death."⁶¹ Long before Friedrich considered the horrors of the bombing war, the Landsers faced a similar challenge. The Landsers are at their most descriptive when recounting the numerous battles in which they were involved. Sajer recalls one terrifying scene in which "the Russians pressed their attack, bringing on their tanks. Our cries of distress were mingled with the screams of the two machine gunners and then the shouts of revenge from the Russian tank crew as it drove over the hole, grinding the remains of the two gunners into that hateful soil...The treads worked over the hole for a long time."⁶² Scenes that defy belief become the norm as one reads about the combat experiences of the Landsers. Bidermann recalls one battle where waves upon waves of Russians charged his position, and dead stacked up so high that he was reminded of medieval soldiers stacking dead bodies as makeshift barricades. Describing yet another assault of the same kind, he writes:

Pushed to hatred and thirst for blood through liberal rations of vodka, the Russians staggered and reeled ahead of the threatening pistols wielded by their commissars, their loud screams of "Urrah!" again lost in the deafening roar of exploding weapons. Over the din I heard the machine gunner cry, "I can't just keep on killing!" as he squeezed the trigger and held it tightly, sending a stream of bullets from the smoking MG barrel into the masses of attackers. Our Pak projectiles screamed and tore holes

⁶¹ Robert G. Moeller, "On the History of Man-made Destruction: Loss, Death, and Germany in the Bombing War," *History Workshop Journal* 61 (2006): 109.

⁶² As quoted in Fritz, 42.

in the collapsing ranks. This attack ground to a halt hardly fifty paces from the muzzle of our gun.⁶³

Here Bidermann provides a “powerful description” of the face of mass death. Certainly such an experience could only be described as traumatic. Aside from the sheer intensity of this account, it is interesting to note that Bidermann’s view that the Russian soldiers were thrown into battle drunk and under threat from their commissars. The Red Army early in the war relied on coercion to force their soldiers to fight before the Soviet propaganda machine transformed the war into a defense of the Motherland. The roles would be reversed later in the war when Hitler would assign National Socialist officers, or “politruks” to ensure ideological rigidity and force landsers to fight to the last man.⁶⁴ In addition, the machine gunner’s cry “I can’t just keep on killing” is a strange, human contrast to the butchery that was going on around them. There was something haunting after the killing was over, as one landser described it, that reminded one that the shattered bodies had once been living, breathing people whose “yellowed prints of family photos and the faded ink trails of letters once written with warm hearts...spill out of the packs and pockets of unknown men.”⁶⁵ Death and destruction in this environment became the norm, cruelty a casual and expected occurrence.

As a result, the Landsers became victims in two senses. First, they not only directly experienced death and destruction, the loss of friends and ultimately of innocence, they also actively engaged in dealing out death, often in gritty hand to hand combat. Second, they saw Hitler pervert what they thought to be a “noble venture” in support of

⁶³ Bidermann, 57. The term “MG” refers to the MG-42 machine gun, one the finest machine guns of the war and capable of an incredible rate of fire. “Pak” refers to the towed anti-tank gun, at the time of this passage it fired 37mm high explosive, anti-tank, or anti-personnel rounds.

⁶⁴ Bidermann, 227; Knappe, 176.

⁶⁵ As quoted in Fritz, 42.

their homeland into a national disaster (and crime) of the highest order. The shattered bodies of their comrades added to the senselessness and disillusionment, bringing intimately close the human cost of Hitler's mismanagement.

Amidst the horrors of combat, a feeling of intense comradeship grew between landsers and became their anchors to sanity. Camaraderie was fostered by the Wehrmacht as a key source of morale, and it was bolstered by the practice of assigning men from certain regions to the same companies. This meant that soldiers had at least something in common, having knowledge of each other's families, friends, or hometowns. During one battle Bidermann mentions a friend by the name of Fritz, whom he had known since his very first recruit training.⁶⁶ Sajer describes one sergeant claiming that "a genuine soldier's life is the only life which brings men close to each other on terms of absolute sincerity."⁶⁷ It seems that the only way one could survive the horrors of combat was to develop strong bonds with the men in one's squad or platoon. Knappe described the depth of this bond and the consequences of crossing it:

The Russian soldiers in the first line of trenches, who should have surrendered, had turned and were shooting us in the back, and some of our people were killed or wounded by this fire. Of course, their country was being invaded by the German Army and they were desperate. Still, this was at a personal level, and no German *or Russian* soldier could have that code of honor broken by the enemy without going almost mad...In a combat situation, the soldier is under inhuman stress to begin with, and when he sees a friend he has been sharing his life with suddenly drop because he was shot in the back, it is too much...Our soldiers went berserk, and from that point on during the attack they took no prisoners and left no one alive in a trench or foxhole.⁶⁸

The bonds they formed with other soldiers were the most important part of a Landsers' life. The episode Knappe described illustrates this in gritty detail. The sense of

⁶⁶ Bidermann, 131.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 165.

⁶⁸ Knappe, 193.

brotherhood they shared with other Landsers proved to be their anchors to sanity, even their humanity. Violating this bond unleashed their most murderous instincts. This camaraderie found in the Landsers is without a doubt similar to the experiences of American soldiers who found that one could only trust the man next to him. The historian Stephen Ambrose's work *Band of Brothers* focuses on this intense bond that develops between fighting men as he follows Easy Company of the 101st Airborne from training through the end of the war.⁶⁹

Consequently, while the memoirs of the Landsers are markedly different in style and focus from those of the generals, several important similarities tie them together. In both groups there exists a concern that they – either the generals or the soldiers – would be viewed as Nazis, a label which apparently carried dishonor with it. They sought to construe their service as honorable and in the best interests of their country, at least until Hitler's gross malfeasance became painfully apparent. Whereas the Landsers initially followed Hitler very willingly to war, in their memoirs they, like the generals, condemn Hitler for his foolish and costly leadership of the army. And finally, most soldiers' memoirs deal with the day to day matters and battle in which they were involved, describing their experiences in an attempt to convey the exhilaration and tragedy of war.

⁶⁹ Stephen Spielberg also explores the murderous response of American soldiers to the loss of one of their own in *Saving Private Ryan*. Although the men are prevented from executing their prisoner by a dramatic intervention by Tom Hanks' character, the implication is that not all soldiers were so restrained.

Chapter 3

Cognitive Dissonance and Victim-hood

Having discussed some of the main themes structuring the memoirs of both German generals and soldiers, several issues demand further inquiry. The generals sought to portray themselves as gentlemen, yet they endorsed very violent methods to achieve their war aims. How were these two philosophies reconciled? Why did the generals avoid discussing the plot to overthrow Hitler? Second, how do the Landsers confront the problem of remembering a war with such tragic consequences? And how did post-war German society remember those who served in Hitler's war? This chapter addresses these problems, using secondary research to introduce clarity into the murky realm of memory.

Cognitive Dissonance

As has been shown, an overarching goal in the memoirs is to present the authors as good German soldiers without much to do with the Nazi regime. Manstein and Knappe make this clear in their introductions, stating that their memoirs are the works of simple soldiers. To accentuate and support their claims, the generals and soldiers call themselves and others gentlemen; Manstein in particular refers to his Christian heritage, and Kesselring claims that the war, to his knowledge, was fought with chivalry.¹ Contemporaries such as Liddell Hart "argued relentlessly that [the German generals] were no more than honourable and patriotic professional soldiers who had generally kept aloof from politics, had had an instinctive class and caste dislike for the Nazi regime, and had not been involved in Nazi atrocities."² Though unpopular at the time, Liddell Hart's

¹ A key caveat. When it comes to memoirs it shields the author from responsibility, and claims of poor memory make it impossible to contradict him.

² Azar Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Panzer Arm* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 2000), 43.

campaign benefited from his reputation; more importantly, his view of the German generals almost perfectly mirrors the perception they sought to convey.

Liddell Hart supported the generals as the key to reviving his fame, since they had spectacularly executed ideas he claimed to have produced prior to the war. Indeed, he had much to do with the way history perceived the German generals. Through his personal contact with many of them, he instigated the drafting and publishing of Manstein and Guderian's memoirs. Liddell Hart had discovered through interviews that the German officer corps had avidly read and discussed the pioneering efforts of the British Army in mobile warfare, including the works of J.F.C. Fuller and himself. Recognizing that many of the senior German officers were in his debt, and that they might credit him with the ideas that led to the creation of the Panzer arm, Liddell Hart supported the generals and used his influence to find them publishers. He first approached Manstein, asking him to insert sentences into his memoir that would credit Liddell Hart with the inspiration for the Ardennes offensive which Manstein had conceived and which led to the defeat of France in 1940. Manstein refused, allowing only the unrevealing: "Captain Liddell Hart, he said, had suggested in an article before the war that an armoured thrust through the Ardennes was technically possible."³

Guderian, on the other hand, was living with his wife in near poverty when Liddell Hart approached him in 1948 about writing a memoir. Guderian agreed, hoping the sales of his memoir might garner him a sizable income. Liddell Hart endeavored to find a publisher for Guderian's work, but publishers turned it down for being "full of self-pity and unrepentant nationalism."⁴ After correcting the problematic passages, *Panzer*

³ *Ibid*, 44.

⁴ Quoted in Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Panzer Arm*, 45-46.

Leader became a best-seller in 1952. In return for Liddell Hart's help, Guderian popularized the idea that Liddell Hart was largely the inspiration for the success of the German 'Blitzkrieg.' Upon request, Guderian added the following to the English edition of his memoir:

Further, it was Liddell Hart who emphasized the use of armoured forces for long-range strokes, operations against the opposing army's communications, and also proposed a type of armoured division combining panzer and panzer-infantry units. Deeply impressed by these ideas I tried to develop them in a sense practicable for our own army. So I owe many suggestions of our further development to Captain Liddell Hart.⁵

In return, Liddell Hart presented Guderian as more important than Hitler to the creation and success of the Panzer arm, a clear overstatement, if not a fabrication.⁶ Not only had Hitler been the critical and enabling personage in the creation of the Panzer arm, neither Guderian nor Liddell Hart had played such prominent roles as they claimed. From the Reichswehr onward, the German army watched and studied developments abroad in mobile warfare intently. They translated all of the important documents on tank warfare from nearly every army, and published many of them in the General Staff's semi-official professional journal *Militar-Wochenblatt*. While it was true that by 1925-1927 British advances were the most keenly watched, it was often people other than Liddell Hart or Guderian who played leading roles. Blumentritt wrote, "We delighted in the modern spirit of writers such as Fuller and Liddell Hart."⁷ Fuller, not Liddell Hart, was the acknowledged authority. German officers regarded Liddell Hart's writings as additions to Fuller's, rather than the primary sources. Manstein referred to "General Fuller" when he

⁵ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 20.

⁶ Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Panzer Arm*, 68-69.

⁷ Quoted in Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Panzer Arm*, 53.

described the Wehrmacht's success in escaping static warfare.⁸ Likewise, Guderian, in the 1920s when much the theoretical work of mobile warfare was taking place, was merely another officer supporting mobile warfare as a solution to *Stellungskrieg*.⁹

Liddell Hart's efforts resulted in the revival of his reputation. His influence on the memoirs calls into question his actual role in the creation of the Panzer arm, a subject Azar Gat deals with in detail in *British Armour Theory and the Panzer Arm*. For our purposes, this story reveals some of the circumstances or causes for writing the memoirs. Financial gain was a factor, and in Manstein's case, gratitude for Liddell Hart's intervention to lessen the hardship he suffered while in a prisoner-of-war camp, among other subsequent favors.¹⁰ The generals no doubt guessed Liddell Hart's self-serving overtures, and so were probably aware their memoirs might serve similar goals.

Consciously self-serving or not, the generals' memoirs present a strong case for collective cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, the generals employed a Machiavellian view that drew much from the growth of proto-fascist ideology during the period. Indeed, Azar Gat has shown proto-fascism to have been a prevalent influence within the German army, if not also German society and much of Europe.¹¹ The language used by Guderian, Knappe, and others reflects its influence. Particularly related to war, proto-fascism envisions a Social-Darwinist, hygienic view that praises war and success as marks of strength. This helps explain the peculiar difficulties experienced by Allied interrogators when the "twisted logic" of the generals regarded success as morally right.¹² In the Social-Darwinist perspective, whatever succeeds increases the fitness of the species;

⁸ Manstein, 63.

⁹ Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Panzer Arm*, 44-49, 53, 59.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹ Azar Gat, *Fascist and Liberal Visions of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

¹² Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 429.

hence might makes right. The charge “crimes against humanity” made little sense to the Germans under trial at Nuremberg. thus the repeated discussions of what Hitler did wrong and how certain decisions might have won the war. As long as Hitler was winning, he was improving the German people, and, in Keitel’s words, “nothing convinces a soldier more than success.”¹³ The acceptance of struggle as not only a fact of life, but something to be sought is evident by admissions such as Knappe’s and the generals whose only source of shame comes from the Holocaust.¹⁴ A titanic war between peoples fits their ideology; they accept that it revealed them to be inferior. When asked after the war if Germany must lead Europe, Kesselring replied, “Not at present. The time has passed.”¹⁵ Moreover, Hitler’s racial ideology fit into the strata of Social-Darwinism. It appealed to the aristocratic, class-conscious tendencies of the German military.

This belief that success equaled right action emerged from the military society preferred by German nationalism. Rooted in Clausewitz and the Prussian tradition, a radical view of war and politics took hold in Germany, especially over the armed forces. Clausewitz argued for an absolute kind of warfare, in which military viewpoints are subordinated to the political. He considered war “as a normal and regular phase of human relations in general and of politics in particular, and of annihilation of the enemy as the real purpose of warfare (and therefore implicitly of politics!).”¹⁶ The generals may not have been completely apolitical, but they certainly demonstrated the subordination of their viewpoints, most clearly in the cases where, foreseeing the ill effects of Hitler’s war strategy, continued to faithfully execute their missions.

¹³ Robert Gellately. ed. *The Nuremberg Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 166.

¹⁴ Knappe, 298. “War is a calculated risk, with a winner and loser.” Compare with Kesselring, 314.

¹⁵ As quoted in Gellately, 319.

¹⁶ Albert T. Lauterbach, “Roots and Implications of the German Idea of Military Society,” *Military Affairs* 5 (1941): 3.

If war is a normal phase of human relations, and annihilation of the enemy is its goal, then Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814) found supporters when he wrote, “between States there is neither law nor right save the law of the strongest.”¹⁷ Predating Darwin by at least 50 years, Fichte anticipated and laid the foundation for the incorporation of “survival of the fittest” into the military-political mindset. Indeed, Walther Rathenau, who ran the German economy during the First World War, remarked, “Modern wars are in the life of nations the same thing as examinations are in civilian life, namely proofs of fitness.”¹⁸ Here Darwin’s term “fitness” comes into play, demonstrating no doubt an awareness of Social Darwinist theory. Mass mobilization as experienced during the First World War transformed the *levee en masse* and made war preparedness the focus of a society. All efforts, economic and political, were to be directed toward a nation’s military fitness in relation to its neighbors. Clausewitz argued for annihilation of the enemy’s armed forces as the purpose of war; the reality of total war upped the ante and made entire peoples the focus of annihilation. With war the “permanent purpose of national life,” Ludendorff glorified it as the “supreme object of a nation’s existence.”¹⁹

The foundations for a “might makes right” philosophy stemmed from German political philosophy regarding military society. Luminaries such as Clausewitz, Bismarck, the elder Moltke, and Ludendorff all supposed that war brought meaning to a nation’s existence, and so it was the role of politics to guarantee its fitness by continually warring against other nations. Hitler saw much to like in these expressions, no doubt arriving at the conclusion that his organization, and National Socialism, was the tool for achieving

¹⁷ Quoted in Lauterbach, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

dominance in modern warfare. Indeed, General Horst von Metzsch, writing in 1937, eagerly linked Hitler and Clausewitz:

[Clausewitz is] the right man for our time. Not because we need this great thinker to understand our present Fuhrer, but to find Adolf Hitler confirmed in many respects by Carl von Clausewitz...If Clausewitz was said to be *le plus allemande des allemands*, then Adolf Hitler is for the world of today the personification of Germany.²⁰

Von Metzsch certainly found much to like with Hitler's positioning of the German people as Europe's rightful masters; Hitler's strategy fit the mold of "full destruction of the enemy with possible glorious self-destruction as the alternative."²¹ Hitler put this military society into effect by appealing to substantial strands of previous German thought. The German generals took their places in the historical development of German military and political thought. The subordination of military viewpoints to the political, the emphasis on war as the natural focus of a nation, and the idea of clashes between nations for survival all worked to convince the generals that not only were they duty bound to prosecute Hitler's war to the last, but also to accept all means for victory as legitimate. Admiral Raeder stated to the effect: "whereas it was desirable to base all military measures on existing international law, nevertheless if a decisive victory could be obtained and success achieved, measures beyond existing international law should be executed."²²

While believing that successful action meant right action, the generals held equally valid a medieval code of warfare that drew heavily upon the notions of chivalry. They believed themselves to be aristocrats, and as such, they conducted themselves with honor and chivalry. This serves as the basis for their pride in their conduct of the war and

²⁰ Quoted in Lauterbach, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² Quoted in Gellately, *The Nuremberg Interviews*, 325.

explains the difficulties one faces when reading the memoirs. Namely, the memoirs read as if the generals reveled in their battlefield experience, feeling no shame because they fought with chivalry. Yet, the expediencies are there, and post-war research has shown the generals' conduct of the war to be less than honorable. That the generals believed themselves both to be chivalrous and expedient helps explain this inconsistency.

The code of chivalry allowed the generals to place themselves within the context of a brutal war. The Holocaust had occurred, yes, but the troops under *their* commands had conducted themselves with honor. Yet even within the memoirs this begins to break down. Kesselring wrote that the war *to his knowledge* had been fought with chivalry. Manstein wrote after his account of the Polish campaign, that “so far, the troops had had a purely military battle to fight, and for that reason it had still been possible to fight chivalrously.”²³ Apparently not all campaigns were fought thus. Keitel recalled that Hitler acknowledged the German officer corps beliefs about the conduct of war, and so his instructions for the war in the East explicitly called for them to “dispense with all their outdated and traditional ideas about chivalry and the generally accepted rules of warfare” because, Hitler reasoned, “the Bolsheviks had long since dispensed with them.”²⁴ He ended his “unforgettable address with the memorable words: ‘I do not expect my generals to understand me; but I shall expect them to obey my orders’.”²⁵

Hitler required obedience from his generals, and Kesselring picked up this refrain when questioned by Leon Goldensohn at Nuremburg. When asked if a soldier should not obey an order if it requires a violation of human rights, Kesselring answered: “A soldier’s first duty is to obey, otherwise you might as well do away with soldiering... In the

²³ Manstein, 63.

²⁴ Keitel, 135.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

military code...no soldier should commit a crime. But during war, with blood in the air, a soldier might do it."²⁶ Like Manstein, Kesselring laid down conditions for fighting war with chivalry. As long as the other party fought honorably, it satisfied the Germans to fight in kind. Such an attitude explains the dramatic differences in brutality between the Eastern and Western fronts. But according to Hitler the Soviets had dispensed with such notions, and as Kesselring said, "If human rights are broken by one side they can be broken by the other."²⁷ Such was the generals' devotion to conducting the war with chivalry.

Kesselring argued that "a military leader often faces a situation he has to deal with, but because it is his duty, no court can try him."²⁸ But why were the generals so eager to perform their duty, even as they saw Hitler leading them into catastrophe? The subject of politics has reared its head several times throughout this discussion, usually with respect to Hitler and National Socialism. As such, the generals cast themselves as apolitical, confining their discussion to the planning and operational aspects of the war.²⁹ But in doing so the generals have foregone their heritage and ignored Clausewitz's famous dictum, "War is policy by other means."³⁰ That war and politics are interconnected is a foundational idea of western warfare; while the German general staff as an institution may have been apolitical, no general would seriously have been ignorant of the political aims of the war. The political aims determine what constitutes victory, and so strategists fashion their plans around such aims.

²⁶ Quoted in Gellately, 322.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁹ Hart, 300; Manz 96-97, on the apolitical nature of the army as seen by a soldier; Kesselring, 210.

³⁰ From Clausewitz's famous work, On War. Clausewitz being a Prussian, would have been intimately known as a military thinker by the German generals of the Second World War.

Colonel General Ludwig Beck, also a product of the German General Staff, undermined this refusal to discuss political matters. Beck resigned voluntarily before the war and was a leader in the ill-fated attempts of the German officer corps to revolt against Hitler. In his view, the generals could not divorce themselves from political matters, and the "German General staff was not simply a corps of military experts; it was also 'the conscience of the Army.'" ³¹ If Beck's assessment was correct, then Guderian, Manstein, et al. failed in their roles as part of the Army's conscience. Not only did they fail to stop Hitler from launching his disastrous war, but they also failed to be forthright in their memoirs. Liddell Hart argues that this adherence to tradition was used to escape the role of conscience, and the "Seeckt-pattern professional became a modern Pontius Pilate, washing his hands of all responsibility for the orders he executed." ³² This is demonstrated by Manstein and Guderian's refusals to take a side in the political matters with which they were invariably parts, revealing, at least in Manstein's case, an abdication of responsibility for flawed or disastrous orders. ³³ In this, one finds a significant theme common to many of the memoirs produced by the German generals; namely, they all predict the ultimate failure of Hitler's leadership, a failure that might have been avoided had ultimate control of the war effort been in their hands.

In point of fact, the generals were well aware of Hitler's war aims and the role National Socialism played in both his political goals and in his designs for the army. Rather than remain apolitical, as they claim in their memoirs, the generals in fact wanted

³¹ Harvey A. DeWeerd, "The German Officer Corps Versus Hitler," *Military Affairs* 13 (1949): 200.

³² B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow & CO. 1948) pg. 18.

³³ Erich Von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, trans. Anthony G. Powell (Novato: Presidio Press 1958, 1982) pg. 287.

to control Hitler and turn the sway National Socialism held over the German soldiers to their own advantage. As Omer Bartov argues:

The chronology and extent of the German generals' assimilation of Nazi ideology and policies have already been well documented. The senior officers believed that they could control Hitler once he came to power and exploit the mass popularity of the National Socialist movement to rally the German people to their own more traditional, albeit far from democratic, concepts of social organization. Some, like Ludwig Beck, for instance (Chief of Staff of the army, who later led the July 1944 Putsch), insisted in the early years of the regime on the so-called 'Two-Pillar Theory', according to which the state would be based on the two most important institutions of the Reich – the Nazi party and the Wehrmacht – and these men believed that they could make use of what they saw as the 'positive' elements of Nazism.³⁴

The refusal by the generals to discuss politics in their memoirs is the refusal of one who played the game and lost. Rather than oppose Hitler, they sought to control him and use him to their advantage. Having failed in this regard, they hid behind the traditions of their institution.

But the treachery goes further, with the acceptance of enormous bribes from Hitler. Historians such as Gerhard Weinberg, Omer Bartov, and Norman Goda argue that greater attention ought to be given to "the systematic bribery of German military figures by Hitler – bribery on a colossal scale."³⁵ The top ranks of the German military received secret, monthly payments that were tax exempt which essentially doubled their pay. For milestone birthdays, they received tax-exempt checks for 250,000 *Reichsmarks*, and "in 1944 a small group of officers was given tremendous landed estates, some valued at over 1 million marks."³⁶ This corruption casts the refusal of German officers to oppose Hitler

³⁴ Bartov, 77.

³⁵ Gerhard L. Weinberg, "Some Thoughts on World War II," *Journal of Military History*. 56 (1992): 660.

³⁶ Norman J. Goda, "Black Marks: Hitler's Bribery of His Senior Officers during World War II," *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 413.

in an entirely new light. For a bribe to work there must be two parties. What is beyond dispute is that officers like Guderian and Manstein accepted enormous bribes from Hitler. How does this information affect one's interpretation of their memoirs? Norman Goda offers a reasonable analysis, saying that "perhaps the most one can suggest here is that bribery provided another determinant of behavior that can take its place among the multiplicity of motives from ideology to complicity to careerism."³⁷ Manstein couches his motives for refusing to take part in a violent overthrow of Hitler's government in altruistic terms – he mentions only the negative effects such an event would have on Germany and its soldiers. Interestingly, Goda suggests that the bribes created a bond of reciprocity between Hitler and his generals. That is, the receipt of such gifts instilled a sense of gratitude that the generals were unable to get around. Oaths can be broken, but gratitude is a powerful motivator.³⁸ The idea of reciprocity helps explain why so few high ranking generals took part in the plots to overthrow Hitler. At the very least, because they had received such gifts, they might have felt that inaction would fulfill their desire to not injure their benefactor. Indeed, only von Witzleben, among those who received bribes from Hitler, "took an active part in the plot to kill Hitler on July 20, 1944."³⁹

Indeed, the question of why the German generals did not unite to overthrow Hitler has a complicated and interesting history.⁴⁰ Manstein writes that after asking soldiers to sacrifice themselves in battle, it would have been unconscionable to precipitate defeat by his own hands, as any plot to overthrow was doomed to failure. Recalling Bartov's analysis of the generals' understanding of the power of National Socialism and von

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 417.

³⁸ Goda, 417-418.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁴⁰ For more see, Harvey A. DeWeerd, "The German Officer Corps Versus Hitler," *Military Affairs* 13 (1949).

Beck's Two-Pillar system cast this refusal in a new light. Along with healthy bribes to make compliance profitable, Manstein's case in particular is quite condemning. His refusal to join the plot and his repeated attempts to get Hitler to appoint a separate Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Front (which he details in his memoir) suggest that he bought into the Two-Pillar system, especially since he stood a chance to be the second pillar. If Manstein had convinced Hitler to establish this new position, the Army would have run the war and exerted a much more powerful influence over the German soldier. The generals' plans to rule co-equal with Hitler might have succeeded had Hitler allowed them to run the war. Rather than refuse to oppose Hitler for the greater good of Germany, as they say in their memoirs, it would appear that the generals refused to oppose Hitler because they retained hope of siphoning off his power.

The Landsers

How does one remember a fruitless war? Landsers writing their memoirs in the 1950s answered this question in similar ways. The soldiers expressed a common sense of loss. Their early manhood had been devoured by the war. They also counted their innocence among the millions of friends, parents, and siblings lost. Descriptions of combat and death evoked images of intense suffering. They honored their fallen comrades and emphasized the bonds of brotherhood that developed within units as a source of strength.

Concurrent with the publishing of the memoirs, East and West Germany were individually attempting to forge collective memories of the war. East Germans saw themselves as victims of Nazism and the Soviets as liberators. In West Germany, a fear existed that referring to German suffering would create a victim status that would

overshadow Germany's responsibility for victimizing others. Even so, it became common in West Germany to describe Germans as "victims of a war that Hitler started but everyone lost."⁴¹ This conception reflects the way the Landsers described the war. Specifically, they saw the war originally as a means to redressing the wrongs of the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler, however, perverted this "noble venture" by initiating the Holocaust and ultimately losing the war, bringing untold sorrow upon Germany. The Landsers, by contrast, were victims of Hitler's malfeasance. Indeed, in postwar polls, all but a handful of West German citizens believed the soldiers had merely done their duty and that the Wehrmacht was not involved in criminal acts.⁴²

Research shows this perception to be inaccurate. The Wehrmacht was involved in crimes during the war, and Hitler enjoyed a large measure of support from the soldiers. Bartov argues, "by and large, the German soldier on the Eastern Front felt that he was fighting for the cause of National Socialism and was motivated by an unquestioning belief in Hitler."⁴³ The reason for this acceptance of National Socialist ideology by the common soldier, at least on the Eastern front, was that "with its harsh climate difficult geography and, especially, brutal fighting, [the Eastern Front] formed a particularly fertile ground for the growth of 'beliefs' and myths, and seems to have enhanced the need of the troops to be provided with ideological credos and catechisms."⁴⁴ Of the memoirs surveyed, only Kesselring did not serve extensively on the Eastern Front. The rest spent all or nearly all of their wartime experience fighting in the east against the Soviet Union.

⁴¹ Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of the Second World Wars," *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 152.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 150-158.

⁴³ Bartov, 105, 69. For detailed documentation of the level of support for Nazi ideology within the German army, see Bartov's work cited above.

⁴⁴ Bartov, 102.

making Bartov's analysis particularly applicable. The purpose of these myths, Bartov continues, was to not only "stiffen their determination in fighting the enemy, but also to drive away from their minds the growing realization of the approaching defeat and the hopelessness of the situation."⁴⁵ The German soldier was receptive to these myths due to the years of anti-Bolshevik and anti-Semitic indoctrination that they had experienced through Goebbals' propaganda machine.⁴⁶ It placed Germany in a struggle for existence against the USSR, resulting in a firm belief in the Fuhrer among the German soldiers that was every bit as strong as it was in the civilian population, "stiffening their morale" and persisting even in defeat.

The purpose of pointing out the inaccuracies of the memoirs is to show how they complicate the politics of memory. These omissions served two roles. First, in the context of the Cold War, as Moeller notes, "it was more important to forge an alliance against a common enemy than to revisit the complicated past of the Wehrmacht's involvement in criminal acts."⁴⁷ The Allies saw West Germany as vital for preventing Soviet dominance of Europe. Obscuring the Wehrmacht's complicity fueled West German confidence and resistance to Communism. Second, it allowed the soldiers to appear as victims. Returning POWs especially became considered as double victims of both Hitler and the Soviets. "Their redemption for past crimes became the redemption of all Germans."⁴⁸ Thus, West Germans supported the former soldiers in believing their service honorable. The memoirs did not merely minimize Nazism's role to make the soldiers look better; the narrative of a

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁶ Bidermann, Manz, Sajer, and Knappe all assert the criminality of the Communist regime, reflecting their government's influence.

⁴⁷ Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims?," 158.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

Wehrmacht untarnished by Nazism's excesses also served an important cultural and political role.

In one sense, however, the Landsers were truly victims.⁴⁹ Military justice in the Wehrmacht was brutal at best and in most cases unforgiving. Influenced by National Socialist rhetoric, soldiers accused of cowardice or theft were thought of as betraying the entire German *Volk*, and these two crimes carried a punishment of death. The carrying out of a death sentence required the signature of the senior commander, referred to as the *Gerichtsherr*.⁵⁰ Generally the army or corps commander, this general reviewed each case and either upheld or commuted the sentence. Since research suggests that up to 30,000 German soldiers were executed by the Wehrmacht, German leaders were "evidently signing death sentences at the rate of almost a thousand a month in the last two years of the war."⁵¹ This war on the German soldier was a result of the totalitarian regime they served, illustrating the victim-hood of the Landsers. Surprisingly, this fact does not seem to figure into the rhetoric of German victim-hood. Expellees from eastern portions of Germany, along with POWs and the millions of women raped by the Soviet army draw most of the attention of those seeking to illustrate Germany's suffering. Jorg Friedrich has drawn attention to the devastation of Germany caused by the Allied bombing campaign, but none include Nazism's treatment of its own soldiers in the narrative of German suffering. If any case can be made for the victim-hood of the German soldier, then certainly Hitler's disregard for their lives through his conduct of the war and courts-martial deserves attention.

⁴⁹ That is, notwithstanding their victim-hood as participants in a very blood war.

⁵⁰ Weinberg, 374.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 374.

The experiences of American bomber crews make an interesting comparison, illuminating especially the level of trauma experienced by those engaging in combat during the Second World War. Like Bidermann's MG gunner, who cried "I just can't keep on killing!" while bullets streamed into the Soviet ranks, the American crews understood that most of their bombs did not fall on military targets. One pilot recalled, "The specter of...the extermination of innocents would forever lie in the back of my mind as I matured." Even though their victims were miles below them, Eight Air Force psychiatrists found that airmen did not "tolerate well the guilt of killing."⁵² But the loss of friends weighed even harder upon their minds. The Landsers especially remembered the first friend they lost, and they communicated the death of friends with particular care. American aircrews dealt with the loss of friends by never speaking of the fallen; one navigator recalled that he and his friends "decided that funerals were not for survivors."⁵³ No airman thought himself a hero. Like the Landsers, they regarded their fallen comrades as the real heroes, deserving all the credit and honor.

Camaraderie was one of the central aspects of a soldier or airman's life during the war. The loss of friends produced some the lowest lows, but the bonds of brotherhood also sustained them. American B-17 Flying Fortress gunner Jack Novey put it best:

"I can't explain why we bomber crews, without any gung ho attitude at all, would put our lives on the line mission after mission against the terrible odds of those days...Even when my fears were about to overwhelm me, even when I was physically sick, I kept flying my missions. I didn't want to let my crewmates down. I would rather have been dead."⁵⁴

The same may be said for the Landsers. Knappe wrote: "Men who share combat become brothers, and this brotherhood is so important to them that they would give their lives for

⁵² Quoted in Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 365.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

one another. It is not just friendship, and it is stronger than flag and country.”⁵⁵ An illustration from the experience of American aircrews helps emphasize the strength of these bonds of brotherhood. Four sergeants on a B-17 Flying Fortress made a pact that they would not abandon one another, regardless of what happened. When their plane was fatally hit by shrapnel, the mechanism for the ball turret became jammed, trapping the gunner. Unable to extricate him, the other three sergeants honored their pact and refused to bail out. The four died together.⁵⁶

Not surprisingly, combat fatigue became a serious problem among Americans fighting in Europe. A full one-third of non-fatal casualties among American troops fighting the Wehrmacht proved psychiatric.⁵⁷ Studies showed the troops could only withstand one hundred days of combat before they needed to be pulled off the line or experience mental and emotional breakdown. Aircrews experienced similar stresses and rates of mental breakdown. Initially, the Eighth Air Force treated cases of “flying fatigue” in a way not unlike the Wehrmacht: they considered men refusing to fly cowards, lacking what the British termed “moral fiber.”⁵⁸ But unlike the Germans, who executed those convicted of cowardice, the Eighth Air Force eventually came around to acknowledging the real, psychological effects of combat. Medical officers developed measures to rehabilitate troubled flyers, but the overall mental and emotional toll remains unclear.⁵⁹ The Landsers found no such aid at the time. Eventually, the West German government took measures to help financially former soldiers, POWs, and expellees, but

⁵⁵ Siegfried Knappe, *Soldat*, trans. Ted Brusaw (New York: Orion Books, 1992), 193.

⁵⁶ Miller, 135.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

the psychological damage went unannounced. For the Landsers, their memoirs served as a method for sorting out their emotional experiences and memories.

Conclusion

In the end, the German generals' view of the war reflected a deep seated cognitive dissonance. They believed themselves warriors and gentlemen, keepers of the noble code of chivalry. And yet, as the Holocaust and research like that of Omer Bartov attests, they proved capable of executing chilling orders in pursuit of victory. Some of their own testimony revealed this clash of viewpoints, as they stressed duty and obedience as excuses for their actions.

They were not an aberration. The roots of their thinking went back a hundred years to Clausewitz and the end of the Napoleonic Wars. German political thought had used him as a springboard, indeed as a benchmark, and Hitler needed only to express what already existed. The generals were products of a society that had its foundations in Clausewitz and Hitler as its unfortunate architect. Recognizing the incompatibility of the views expressed by the generals helps explain their actions, as well as helping reconcile the at times difficult statements within their memoirs.

In a way, the generals faced the ultimate dissonance. They were quite skilled in warfare and proved exemplary officers, for the most part. The Wehrmacht was regarded as the most fearsome military in the world, and they were the pioneers of its success. For a while, they appeared invincible. And yet, they lost. Not only did they lose, their homeland was devastated and then partitioned. Thus criticisms of Hitler and a "might-have-been" tone at times infiltrate their memoirs. In some ways, the generals could not believe they lost. Moreover, the prideful generals faced the shame cast on their war effort

by the Holocaust. The country they had so boldly defended had perpetrated one of the most horrid crimes in history. Balancing the pride of their service with the onus of the Holocaust certainly proved difficult.

The Holocaust also complicated the Landsers' task of remembering the Second World War through their memoirs. While American GIs returned home to cheering crowds, the German soldiers who were lucky enough not to be interned in the Soviet Union returned to a war torn Germany and burdened with the knowledge that their best years had been wasted. They expressed a common sense of loss, not only of friends and family, but also a loss of innocence. They had seen the face of mass death, had participated in it, but as it had been during the war, the brotherhood they experienced was most important. They wrote their memoirs in tribute to the fallen, as a way of remembering those who had lost it all.

In the post-war years, West Germany in particular supported those Germans who fell victim to Hitler's crime. POWs, expellees from eastern German regions, and former soldiers fell into this category. The Landsers had merely done their duty, and Hitler was the criminal for using their service for his twisted purposes. Regardless of the degree of belief in the Fuhrer among the Landsers, they were nevertheless victimized by his cruel disregard for their lives. His policies in the later war years sacrificed thousands of soldiers for no gain except his vanity. Hitler also implemented a military justice system that executed several divisions' worth of soldiers during the war, disregarding the trauma of combat and his own failures to provide his soldiers with the materials necessary for war. The experience of the Landsers proved Manstein's belief that the massive loss of life among the soldiers did not trouble Hitler overmuch.

What lessons do these memoirs hold for the 21st century reader? In the generals' case, they serve as a warning that even the most educated, professional men may be enlisted for the most nefarious of purposes. Intelligence and sophistication were weak guards and actually enabled the generals to more effectively suppress their misgivings. Power remains eminently persuasive, and while duty and obedience are certainly soldierly qualities, they must not totally override conscience. Courage is not only displayed on the battlefield. As for the Landsers, their experience reminds us of the human cost of war. Even those who are not killed in battle nevertheless become casualties to some extent. Societies that send their young men off to war must embrace them when they return home. And it is beholden upon the political leaders to weigh the human and psychological costs of warfare before committing their troops into battle. The German General Staff devoted a portion of its man power to the study of history; while the American military has largely foregone such an enterprise, this study of German memoirs demonstrates that some elements of warfare hold true regardless of the sophistication of the weaponry.

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