



Germany and the Second World War, vol. 8: The Eastern Front 1943–1944: The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts

by Karl-Heinz Frieser, et al.

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Nearly forty years after the German Research Institute for Military History released its first volume in the ground-breaking *Germany and the Second World War*, Oxford University Press has published an English translation of volume 8 in the series: *The Eastern Front 1943–1944* (orig. 2007). It offers an unsurpassed examination of German operational warfare in the East and briefer overviews of actions in southeastern Europe during the war's last two and a half years.

In Part I, "From Stalingrad to Kursk," Bernd Wegner (Helmut Schmidt Univ.) sets the Germans' 1943/44 campaigns in the context of their strategic position following the Stalingrad debacle. He contends that their defeat on the Volga left Germany "no longer able to win the war" (7) against either the Soviet Union or the larger Allied coalition. His detailed analyses of German manpower and armaments output, as well as the increasing threat of a second front in Europe, highlight the Third Reich's growing inferiority vis-à-vis its opponents: the "serious crisis" on the eastern front was exacerbated by a "multitude of parallel strategic, operational, economic, and political crises" (33). Wegner persuasively argues that, after Stalingrad, Germany suffered from a fatal "absence of a coherent grand strategy" (38).

In Part II, "The Battle of the Kursk Salient," Karl-Heinz Frieser² disassembles several persistent myths about the battle. First of all, though it was the largest land battle of the war in terms of men and weapons, it was not a decisive "turning-point," but "only a limited offensive operation that was part of a strategic defence" (169). Secondly, Frieser refutes the claim that the German panzer arm died during the battle of Prokhorovka. Through an examination of corps- and divisional-level records, he shows that during the whole of Operation Citadel, II SS Panzer Corps, which handled most of the fighting at Prokhorovka, lost only thirty-three tanks and assault guns and none at all on the day of the battle itself. During the German offensive, the Wehrmacht wrote off 252 tanks, while its Red Army adversaries officially admitted losing 1,614 (in actuality, nearer 1,950). Rather than the commonly cited "death ride" of German armor, it should have been a decisive defeat for the Red Army. Frieser also puts the German offensive at Kursk into the larger context of the summer's fighting with brief examinations of the Soviet counteroffensives at Orel and Belgorod-Kharkov. A fuller discussion of these operations would have been useful.

In Part III, "The Perplexities of War: The Soviet Theatre in German Policy and Strategy from the Summer of 1943," Wegner considers how the USSR fit into German strategy after the defeat at Kursk. The "total war" that emerged in mid-1943 was, he writes, in reality "a war of total rhetoric.

1. Table of Contents – www.miwsr.com/rd/1804.htm.

2. A colonel (ret.) in the German Army, Frieser was researcher in the German Armed Forces Military History Research Office (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt [MGFA]).

Its main purpose was to reinterpret defeats as victories, setbacks as opportunities, and sadness as pride” (215). Such rhetoric masked a “permanent crisis of leadership” (213) in which Adolf Hitler’s “strategic necessity” clashed with “what his generals considered operationally feasible” (218). But the Führer’s “seizure of military power” (218) through his command of both the OKW and the army itself and his promotion of men who unconditionally followed his dictates caused a “politically motivated de-professionalization of the top military leadership” (227). This transformed the German war in the East from a salvage operation to one that featured walls running from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, scorched earth retreats that ravaged the Soviet Union, and a reliance on the ideological commitment of the average soldier.

In Part IV, “The Swing of the Pendulum: The Withdrawal of the Eastern Front from Summer 1943 to Summer 1944,” includes chapters by Klaus Schönherr (formerly of MGFA) on “The Withdrawal of Army Group A through the Crimea to Romania” and Frieser on the retreats of Army Groups North, Center, and South across the remainder of the front. The emphasis here is on the Germans’ numerical weakness and deteriorating operational practice. Only by moving beleaguered panzer divisions around the front to stiffen weak sectors could the Germans hope to hold the line. “This constant toing and froing clearly shows the growing helplessness behind the decisions of the top leadership” (343). Though the Germans’ panzer divisions could achieve tactical gains, “at the decisive moment they lacked the two or three additional armored units needed for operational exploitation of their tactical successes” (371). The scarcity of machines, men, and reserves rendered a weakened German army able only to slow but not defeat a still poorly led and trained Red Army. The use of panzer units had changed radically by this point, as reflected in Erich von Manstein’s dismissal in April 1944: “His name symbolized an operational concept, and his dismissal finally paved the road to ruin on the eastern front” (445).

Part V, “Collapse in the East: The Withdrawal Battles from the Summer of 1944,” focuses on the destruction of Army Group Center in Operation Bagration, the actions of Army Group North, and the situations in Romania and Hungary. Frieser excoriates the Germans for the strategic, intelligence, and operational errors that culminated in the destruction of Army Group Center. Bad decisions by commanders combined with Hitler’s ill-advised fortified-places strategy had catastrophic effects on a Wehrmacht sorely lacking in numbers and mobility. Its defeat “marked the absolute nadir of ‘the art of operational command’ in the German military” (594).

Schönherr assesses in detail the problems of coalition fighting that emerged between German and Romanian units, as well as the political crises within Romania that climaxed in a coup d’état that resulted in its joining the Allies. As in Belarus, poor command decisions and a dearth of men and machines led to disaster. The German Sixth Army suffered its second death in Romania, where it lost over 150,000 men owing to “the extent of errors committed in the command” of the army (812).

Krisztián Ungváry (Inst. for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution) considers the Hungarian theater of war with a solid analysis of battlefield events, while also demonstrating the importance of Hungarian industry and military manpower to the German war effort. Even in early 1945, the Wehrmacht still retained real combat effectiveness in what had become a critical theater of war for the Reich; without Hungary’s oil, the German war effort simply would have seized up.

Part VI, “The War on the Neighbouring Fronts,” provides snapshots of the Finnish campaign against the Soviet Union, the German intervention in Yugoslavia, and the retreat of German forces from Greece and Italy. Wegner details Finland’s contortionist and ultimately successful attempts to drop out of the war without provoking a German invasion or Soviet occupation. Klaus Schmider (Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst) succinctly clarifies events in occupied Yugoslavia

by demonstrating the complexity of the situation facing the Germans due to a bewildering number of resistance groups, inept Italian occupation policy, and the Croatian Ustasha's genocidal policies. Schmider is compelling on the war crimes committed by occupation powers, less so on the German army's 1941 reprisal measures (admittedly outside his chapter's chronological purview) in the larger context of its anti-partisan policy.

Schönherr presents a brief narrative of Germany's retreat from Greece, and the overview of events in Italy by Gerhard Schreiber (formerly MGFA) smoothly blends operational history with a discerning account of German war crimes committed in the field, particularly during the disarming of the Italian army and anti-partisan combat. His verdict that German behavior in Italy should be viewed with "a sense of shame" is right on the mark.

Part VII, "Germany on the Brink of the Precipice," comprises chapters by Wegner and Frieser. The former avoids viewing Hitler's constant assurances of final victory as the product of an irrational belief in such an outcome and instead argues that "the form his own end would take ... increasingly became ... the central point of everything he thought and did during the last two and a half years of war" (1201). His attempt to fill the "role of the dying hero" (1211) motivated Hitler to lead Germany to its very destruction.

Frieser argues that the archival record demonstrates that "hundreds of thousands of dead, wounded, and captured ... unequivocally attributed to Hitler's crassly wrong decisions" prove that his "operational interventions [in the east] were even more amateurish and his strategic visions even more reckless, than previously assumed" (1217-18)

The book's acute analyses of operations in the East in 1943/44 are its great strength. But the war against the Soviet Union went beyond conventional battlefield engagements, and the parallel *Vernichtungskrieg* (war of annihilation) waged by the Third Reich against the USSR gets short shrift here. Apart from a few pages on the Germans' scorched earth retreats, there is very little on the escalating war of economic plunder, including the army's complicity in the massive Reich Labor Action. Nor does the dirty war waged by the Wehrmacht get any attention. Frieser instead stresses its "systemic efficiency," arguing that "in the second half of war, above all, ideology played an ever-decreasing role. The Wehrmacht troops were fighting not for 'Lebensraum' but for bare survival" (1220). The author's reliance on sources dealing primarily with operations distorts his account of the German war; even a cursory look at the intelligence and quartermaster files of the various German army groups, armies, corps, and divisions indicates that there was much more to this war than just clashes on the battlefield.

Despite this large caveat, the book is a salutary, major study of the German war effort in the eastern theater in 1943/44. In addition, a profusion of excellent maps (eighty-nine in all!) clarifies the narrative throughout. All this makes the book a most worthy addition to the monumental *Germany and the Second World War* series.