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Henrik O. Lunde, *Hitler's Wave-Breaker Concept: An Analysis of the German End Game in the Baltic*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2013. Pp. 278. ISBN 978-1-61200-161-6.

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Historians have long puzzled over the paradox of Adolf Hitler as military strategist—his smashing triumphs of 1939–40 glaringly at odds with the defeats in Russia from late 1941 on. Typically, they credit the early victories to the military professionals in the Army High Command and the later disasters to Hitler's ceaseless meddling in operational matters and, once Germany had lost the initiative, his stubborn insistence on a hold-at-all-costs ground defense. This narrative portrays a Hitler, who, unable to sustain his earlier success, declined into a delusional inner world.

Few scholars, however, have carefully assessed Hitler's military decisions within the framework of his larger political-strategic goals. Carl von Clausewitz asserted that any leader contemplating war should ask himself "what is to be gained by it?" The answer to this crucial political question would then dictate military strategy. Indeed, in his conception of war in general, Clausewitz famously emphasized the precedence of the political over the military. As the political leader of Germany, Hitler articulated two clear goals in making war on the Soviet Union: to destroy the alleged "Jewish-Bolshevik" conspiracy menacing Germany's existence, and to secure the Lebensraum (living space) to supply the raw materials and foodstuffs to make Germany a major power on the scale of Great Britain or the United States. Any proper assessment of Hitler must analyze his military decisions not strictly on an operational basis, but in the larger context of his political, economic, and ideological goals.

This is a difficult proposition. Most studies concentrate on Hitler's clashes with his generals over operational and tactical matters, not the larger strategic goals behind his military decisions. Since German generals, narrowly schooled in professional military matters, often failed to grasp Hitler's strategic concerns, the two sides were often talking past each other: der Führer dismissed the operational and tactical objections of his generals precisely for their failure to recognize the big picture, while the generals were frustrated by his increasing obstinacy and incomprehension of immediate military realities.

In *Hitler's Wave-Breaker Concept*, historian and former US Special Forces officer Henrik Lunde undertakes a sober, much-needed corrective evaluation of Hitler's military decisions, with a stress on the defensive actions of Army Group North after the attempt to defeat the Soviet Union had disintegrated. More specifically, he analyzes Hitler's adoption of the so-called "wave-breaker" concept in late 1943 to slow the Soviet advances in the East. The first third of the book, however, is a sketchy and confusing background assessment of Hitler's strategic thinking and the reasons for the failure of Operation Barbarossa. Lunde underestimates the importance of Germany's specific goals in the Soviet Union. As he himself writes, "strategy must have a coherent concept under which it can be achieved as well as the resources at hand to carry it out successfully" (39). The Reich's principal problem was its lack of critical resources. For both ideological and economic reasons, Hitler believed securing the Lebensraum in the East that would provide such resources necessitated a new type of fighting, a sort of "global blitzkrieg in which each war would nourish the next." But attacking the Soviet Union would mean losing, at least temporarily, the vital supplies it had been providing up to then. Lunde does not fully appreciate the boldness of the gamble that Barbarossa entailed.

Hitler's differences with the Supreme High Command of the Army (OKH) over operational goals, apparent early in the planning phase for Barbarossa, stemmed from his conception of the larger strategic task of securing economic resources as rapidly as possible. By contrast, German generals, true to their training, saw the destruction of the Red Army as their principal goal.

1. Christian Hartmann, *Operation Barbarossa: Nazi Germany's War in the East* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013) 12.

Lunde duly notes that the economic importance of the flanks during Barbarossa led to a dispersal of forces with a consequent lack of a clear focal point of attack, but he understates the responsibility of OKH for this. Because, surprisingly, Hitler did not in this instance attempt to impose his will, Barbarossa was plagued from the start by fatal compromises. So, too, Lunde blames Hitler for ordering the final push on Moscow against his generals' advice, even though generals Franz Halder and Fedor von Bock, both haunted by memories of failure at the Marne in 1914, in fact insisted forcefully on the final advance. On the other hand, Hitler certainly deserves credit for preventing the rout of German forces by the Soviet counterattack in December 1941. It is typical of the disjointed organization of his book that Lunde grudgingly acknowledges this, not in discussing the failures of Barbarossa, but in his initial chapter on Hitler's strategic thinking and then only indirectly, by way of an approving quotation of Napoleon (who ought to know) on the dangers of retreat.

Lunde is on surer footing when he moves to the long German retreat from the USSR, when Hitler's decisions were often explicitly justified on the basis of his larger strategic intentions. Even here, however, he denies that Hitler had a coherent plan, even though a sustained effective defense of the skies over Germany and a successful repulse of the anticipated Anglo-American invasion of France would have significantly altered the strategic equation, at least in the near term.² A stalemate might even have yielded an acceptable peace. Though Hitler was certainly aware of this, in good Clausewitzian fashion, he insisted on dealing from a position of strength (which an effective defense of the continent in the West would have provided). Thus, in the East, the retention of key sources of raw materials vital for war production was paramount. Military factors also played a role, of course, particularly the need to keep the Soviet Baltic Fleet bottled up in the Gulf of Finland in order to safeguard German submarine testing areas in the eastern Baltic.

Lunde carefully examines these issues each in turn. Hitler's fear of losing Finnish nickel, he emphasizes, helps explain his dispatching of troops to Finland in 1943 to hold territory unnecessarily, in order to ensure the Finns' continued support. Lunde notes that Hitler failed to realize that his obsessive clinging to this or that piece of territory was immaterial to the Finns, who had already concluded that Germany could not win the war and desired a way out. In any case, Minister of Armaments Albert Speer had already pointed out to the Führer that the German stockpile of Finnish nickel would suffice until 1946.

Similarly, after the Finns had concluded peace with the USSR and opened the Gulf of Finland to the Soviet Baltic Fleet, it made little sense for the Germans to hold on to Courland as a means of protecting submarine testing areas. Moreover, difficulties in getting the new, Type XXI submarines into service had much less to do with inadequate training zones than with production problems and continual Allied bombing of assembly facilities. Nor did desperately maintaining an enclave in Courland much affect the flow of Swedish iron ore to the Reich, since the Swedes, like the Finns before them, had recognized that Germany would lose the war and adjusted their policy accordingly.

The final economic justification Hitler gave for stubbornly holding on in the Baltic region—safeguarding the Latvian shale oil fields—was not based in reality, for this oil had little impact on Germany's overall needs. Hitler made similarly suspect military decisions in early 1945 to try to retain the last remaining German-controlled oil fields in Hungary. Unlike Heinz Guderian, for whom protecting German borders was always the top priority, Hitler aimed to safeguard oil sources and supply lines, presumably assuming that Germany could still turn the war around.

The Soviet westward advance had rendered moot the German decision to withdraw into the Courland pocket for (ostensibly) economic reasons. This circumstance leads to Lunde's central discussion of the wave-breaker strategy ... and to further inconsistencies in his argument. Throughout, Lunde acknowledges that Hitler's hold-at-all-costs strategy made some sense, given the almost complete German immobility by 1943 in the face of overwhelming Soviet advantages in aircraft and manpower. As Erwin Rommel noted in April 1944, Allied air superiority precluded a mobile defense. Faced with maintaining a long front against an enemy who could quickly concentrate manpower at any point of his choosing, it was often better, Lunde

2. See Gerhard Weinberg, "German Plans for Victory, 1944-45," *Central European History* 26 (1993) 215-28.

acknowledges, for the Germans to fight from prepared positions rather than withdraw under relentless Soviet pressure. By the time of Operation Bagration (June 1944), “the German Army had lost much of its earlier mobility, and the Luftwaffe had completely lost its ability to effectively contest Soviet air superiority.... Trying to withdraw under these circumstances invited disaster unless it had been well preplanned” (123–24). The Germans’ quandary was that both standing in place and any attempt to withdraw virtually ensured the destruction of their forces.

The wave-breaker strategy, then, was an effort to square the circle, being “based on Hitler’s assumption that the enemy required more forces to take or contain ... ‘fortresses’ than were necessary for their defense” (37). There was precedent for this idea, Lunde concedes, in the Wehrmacht’s moderate success in the West in slowing the Anglo-American advance by defending ports needed for logistical reasons. He also grants that earlier successes in holding the Demyansk Salient and the Kholm Pocket figured into Hitler’s calculations. He stresses, however, that Hitler was now applying his concept in vastly changed military circumstances. The tremendous Soviet advances, together with a precipitous drop in the quality of German troops, doomed the wave-breaker strategy and caused a useless sacrifice of good men. Lunde argues that the Germans should have used the high-quality troops trapped in the Courland Pocket to defend the Reich, rather than occupying second-rate Soviet troops in an irrelevant area while inferior *Volkssturm* men struggled to defend German borders. To support his claim, he notes both that Stalin made precisely this point to Churchill in February 1945 and that Soviet military leaders had all along planned to pin Army Group North along the Baltic and then destroy it piecemeal.

But what if German resources had in fact been used differently? Would the outcome have been different? The Red Army had reached its depletion point by April 1945, having exhausted its seemingly inexhaustible manpower. Was this a result of the wave-breaker concept or other factors? Had Hitler deployed German troops differently, could he have achieved a stalemate in the East and altered the ultimate outcome of the war, especially given the looming reality of an American atomic bomb? Hitler had always known that time and resources were against him and hence risked all to secure a quick victory. In his famous November 1937 conference with his generals, he had stressed that the coming war needed to be well in hand by 1943, before the superior resources of Germany’s likely enemies could be brought fully into play. To the very end, he used larger economic-strategic arguments to justify his actions, even when they no longer corresponded to any reality. But underlying this delusion was another rationale for fighting on—Clausewitz’s famous exhortation that a people must defend their freedom to the last, and that “the shame of a cowardly submission can never be wiped out” (22). In the end, as Lunde admits, despite all our best analyses and assessments of motives, Hitler simply decided to follow the revered Prussian theorist’s admonition.