



*The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader* by Stephen G. Fritz.

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In this thoroughly researched and lucid account of Adolf Hitler's role in Nazi Germany's prosecution of World War II, historian Stephen Fritz<sup>1</sup> (East Tennessee State Univ.) assesses whether and to what extent the dictator was an asset or a hindrance as a military leader. Though his final verdict is mixed, Fritz demolishes the conventional wisdom that Hitler's radical goals and erratic decision-making overrode senior Wehrmacht commanders' cool professionalism in pursuing achievable war aims. Hitler could be either more astute or more deluded in his strategic imagination than many of his generals. Fritz has meticulously canvassed primary documents, records of military conferences, and diaries and memoirs to portray a war leader who was no Napoleon but not a "Bohemian corporal" either. *The First Soldier* should be compulsory reading for scholars of war generally, but particularly those with an interest in the connection between political and military leadership.<sup>2</sup>

The book's twelve chapters begin by placing Hitler's military leadership in the context of Carl von Clausewitz's notion of *absolute war* and proceed to describe his performance as *Feldherr* of Germany's armed forces from the invasion of Poland (Sept. 1939) to the Ardennes Offensive (Dec. 1944). Particular enhancements are twelve high-quality maps and thirty-two photographs depicting moments in Hitler's military career, from his time as a Great War *Frontsoldat* to the shot of the withered dictator shaking hands with child-soldiers about to be sacrificed to the hopeless defense of Berlin (Mar. 1945). Other ancillaries include thirty-one pages of notes, a twenty-six-page bibliography, and a useful index.

Fritz notes that Hitler loved to quote Clausewitz to his generals on the primacy of political ends over military means, proving that those who quote Clausewitz the most usually understand him the least.<sup>3</sup> But the Führer's threat to measured military leadership was more fundamental in nature:

Hitler was undone ... because he had unlimited goals that Germany had neither the means nor resources to accomplish.... He claimed that "politics is and can be nothing other than the safeguarding of a people's interest with every means." Hitler then defined the securing of Lebensraum and the destruction of Jewish-Bolshevism as the crucial interests of the German people, and thus the principal goals of the war he thought absolutely necessary for German survival. For Germany to live, others had to die. (17)

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1. His previous work includes *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1995), *Endkampf: Soldiers, Civilians, and the Death of the Third Reich* (id., 2004), and *Ostkrieg: Hitler's War of Extermination in the East* (id., 2011).

2. On which, see also Ben H. Shepherd, *Hitler's Soldiers: The German Army in the Third Reich* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 2016), and Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms, 1939-1945* (NY: Basic Books, 2015).

3. See, esp., Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (NY: Grove Pr, 2007) 1-27.

That is not to say that Hitler was incapable of clear-headed operational thinking. In the Battle of France, Gen. Erich von Manstein, chief of staff of Army Group A, rejected the initial invasion plan as a watered-down version of the Schlieffen Plan that had failed so miserably in 1914; instead, he drafted the brilliant alternative of the sickle-cut offensive. Manstein in turn was fortunate to have at his disposal Gen. Heinz Guderian, the army's foremost advocate of tank warfare, who shared Manstein's enthusiasm for operational daring. But neither of them would have achieved the fame they did, had Hitler not grasped and endorsed their novel plan.

Hitler's instincts were at least as good, if not better, than most of his generals'. In reality, no one had a clear idea of how to proceed, and all were influenced by the failure of the 1914 offensive. While the generals preferred a wait-and-see approach that played to the strength of the Allies, though, Hitler showed concern for protecting the Ruhr, the vital German economic area, from British air attacks. In operational terms, he evinced a flair for surprise and rapid action, an instinct for the weak point of the enemy, and some appreciation for the use of tanks and aircraft. Moreover, his stress on quickly smashing the French and forcing the British off the continent revealed far less respect for the fighting ability of the former than that held by the OKH [High Command of the Wehrmacht]. Most generals not only had an exaggerated opinion of French prowess, but also thought that mobile warfare, so successful against Poland, would not work against a well-trained, highly organized force. (97)

The operational speed these generals achieved gave the German army distinct advantages and lopsided victories over its adversaries during the first two years of the war. But Germany's strategic limitations doomed the Wehrmacht to a protracted war of diminishing returns.

The German army's extraordinary performance in 1939–41 emboldened Hitler to imagine that Britain, having lost its continental ally with the fall of France, might accept German hegemony in Europe (97). But no British government led by Winston Churchill, however bleak its military position, would ever concede to such a humiliation.<sup>4</sup> Hitler also thought the operational formula that had succeeded so well in Poland, France, the Low Countries, and Norway could yield similar results against the Soviet Union and so secure the material resources the Third Reich needed to fight a longer war and attain continental dominance—whatever Britain's attitude.

Great Britain and Russia were connected in the mind of Hitler the Great War veteran, warped by the fever swamp of post-Habsburg Vienna. For him, Germany could fulfil its mission only by destroying the “conspiracy of Jewish-Anglo-Saxon warmongers [and] Jewish ruling powers in the Bolshevik control station in Moscow” (157). Yet even if the opening stages of Operation Barbarossa—the invasion of Russia launched in June 1941—seemed to confirm German assumptions about Soviet weakness and incompetence, the immensity and inexhaustible resources of the USSR forced repeated revisions to the doctrine that had swept all before it in Western Europe.

Fritz blames the OKH as much as Hitler himself for the failure of Barbarossa, notwithstanding his precocious grasp of operational matters. The dictator lacked command experience and a realistic sense of the challenge Barbarossa posed and the resilience the Soviets would show after their early defeats. These problems were exacerbated by a German high command that routinely misled Hitler and maneuvered him into decisions based on widely diverging interpretations of the military situation. Fritz faults Manstein and Guderian here, but his favorite culprit is Gen. Franz Halder, a career staff officer with no field experience. As the Red Army blunted the momentum of German advances, “it was Halder, not Hitler, who initially interfered in the command freedom of

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4. See John Lukacs, *Five Days in London, May 1940* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1999).

field generals and who tried to centralize decision-making in his own person” (161). Even in the planning stages for Barbarossa,

Hitler’s conception was at least as sound as that of the planners at OKH; it was, after all, Halder who split the German invasion force into three separate armies, advancing in divergent directions, and with little concentration of resources. Once the campaign began it was Halder who schemed to alter the operational plan, often against the wishes of his commanders. Moreover, it was he, not Hitler, who initiated the process of denying commanders freedom of action over the battlefield, thus eroding the policy of *Auftragstaktik* [mission-type tactics] that had guided earlier successful campaigns. (372)

By 1944, Joseph Stalin and the Red Army leadership had come to understand the imperatives of absolute war as well the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>5</sup> By then, too, the Normandy invasion and Allied airpower supremacy meant that Germany’s ultimate defeat was only a matter of time. The prescience of any military leaders was beside the point. Neither the surprise the Germans achieved during the Ardennes offensive nor the catastrophic failure of the Allies’ Operation Market Garden could alter the tide of events. Hitler’s generals were reduced to cravenly indulging their master’s delusions.

The Germans had lost the First World War, Hitler believed, both from internal weakness and because the imperial leadership had given up too soon, mistakes that would not be repeated. He would supply the will, while in late May, in front of an audience of generals and other senior officers, he assured his listeners that there would be no inner collapse. “In removing the Jews I eliminated the possibility of creating some sort of revolutionary core or nucleus,” he asserted, then reminded them, “Gentlemen, we are now in a life and death struggle.” (303)

No rational strategy could ever have emerged from any such political cause. As Stephen Fritz has shown so persuasively, far and away the greatest crime the *Wehrmacht*’s ambitious generals committed—against Germany, Europe, and civilization—was allowing themselves to fall under Adolf Hitler’s spell in the first place.

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5. See Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War: Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (NY: Knopf, 2007).