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A MILITARY LEADERSHIP ANALYSIS OF ADOLF HITLER

A Research Paper

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Preface

I have always been fascinated with Adolf Hitler and World War II. It seems that throughout my education and lifetime, the topic of how Hitler's Germany almost ruled the entire world was constantly mentioned in either conversation, books, movies, or television programs. The selection of Hitler as a military leader as my project for Air Command and Staff College presented me with an opportunity to conduct research using memoir literature, official studies, and secondary sources to learn more about the mystique behind the man. In order to evaluate Hitler as a military leader, I examined his strengths, weaknesses, his decision making process, and, specifically, his involvement in the infamous "stop" order issued at Dunkirk and his "no retreat" policy issued at Stalingrad. The purpose of this project was not to establish the fact that Hitler was indeed a military "genius" or a military "failure" as so many have tried before. It is only meant to analyze a man and the different aspects of leadership he employed during his domination of Germany during World War II. If we can gain insights from history on the strengths and weaknesses of military leaders and learn from them, then the purpose behind this project will have been achieved.

I would also like to acknowledge the guidance and assistance I received from Dr. Richard Muller, my faculty research advisor, and the Air University Library Staff for making this research project possible.

Abstract

Before the war, and still more during the conquest of the West, Hitler came to appear a gigantic figure, combining the strategy of a Napoleon with the cunning of a Machiavelli and the fanatical fevour of a Mohomet. After his first check in Russia, his figure began to shrink, and towards the end he was regarded as a blundering amateur in the military field, whose crazy orders and crass ignorance had been the Allies' greatest asset. All the disasters of the German Army were attributed to Hitler; all its successes were credited to the German General Staff.

—B. H. Liddell Hart

Liddell Hart goes on to say that while this description of Adolf Hitler may not be entirely true, there is certainly some truth to it.¹ While conducting the research for this project, it became increasingly apparent that in the late 1930s Hitler was indeed a successful military leader. The impetus behind this success was partly due to Hitler's political decision making process which, in effect, laid the foundation for World War II. However, as his success continued to mount, he became more and more involved in the intricacies of battlefield tactics and strategy. This is where Hitler's and Germany's eventual downfall for the conquest of Europe began. Upon examining Hitler's strengths, weaknesses, and decision making processes as a military leader one can begin to fully appreciate how the infamous "stop" order at Dunkirk and his "no retreat" policy at Stalingrad are often referred to as Hitler's greatest blunders of World War II.

Notes

¹ B. H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: Morrow, 1948), 3.

Chapter 1

Hitler's Political Decision Making Process

Personality and Goals

In order to perform a leadership analysis of Adolf Hitler, one must understand the compelling aspects of his personality. First and foremost, Hitler saw himself as “an agent of Providence, a man of Destiny, whose vision of the future was infallible.”¹ Hitler was convinced beyond any doubt that it was he, and he alone, who possessed the vision, the will power, and the political and military insight to restore Germany to her rightful place among the other nations of the world. This awe-inspiring self-confidence did, however, have its drawbacks as demonstrated by Hitler's inability to accept criticism from those who may not have agreed with his enlightened opinions, views, or decisions. It was not uncommon for Hitler to break into a violent rage and behave much like a spoiled child who didn't get his way whenever his judgment was questioned. This type of personality made it extremely hard for Hitler to change his mind once he had reached a decision or to modify the goals he felt destined to achieve.²

Hitler's career was characterized by the awesome power he achieved over the German people and how he was able to use it to attain his political goals. His power over the people was partly due to his extraordinary talent as an orator. “His speeches were an

instrument of political intoxication that inspired a degree of fervor in his listeners that seems to defy definition and explanation. Hitler was a master at the use of the spoken word and a genius at the art of manipulating mass propaganda for his political ends. His uncanny ability to appeal to the subconscious and irrational needs of his audience and to solicit the desired response made him a formidable political figure.”³ Walter Langer best describes what it was like to attend one of Hitler’s inspirational rallies:

Hitler was a showman with a great sense for the dramatic. Not only did he schedule his speeches late in the evening when his audience would be tired and their resistance lowered through natural causes, but would always send an assistant ahead of time to make a short speech and warm up the audience. Storm troopers always played an important role at these meetings and would line the aisle through which he would pass. At the psychological moment, Hitler would appear in the door at the back of the hall. Then with a small group behind him, he would march through the rows of S.A. men to reach the speaker’s table. He never glanced to the right or to the left as he came down the aisle and became greatly annoyed if anyone tried to accost him or hampered his progress. Whenever possible he would have a band present, and would strike up a lively military march as he came down the aisle.⁴

It was not uncommon for women to faint or for the crowd’s emotions to range from tears to an overwhelming frenzy to the point they were ready and willing to believe almost anything he told them. Hitler was one of the first politicians to utilize the modern technology of his time such as floodlights, public address systems, radio broadcasts, and air transportation to keep the public constantly aware of his political views. Time and time again, he bombarded the German people with the same underlying message: the crucial moment was at hand for Germany to face her destiny, that her problems were unique, and they required new and demanding solutions, and above all it was he and he alone who could provide Germany with the leadership she needed to achieve her destiny.⁵

Hitler was convinced Germany's destiny necessitated the need for more living space or *lebensraum* to the east in order to maintain their living standards and support Germany's ever increasing population. He believed Germany was no longer capable of providing the food supply necessary to sustain the masses within her own borders and could not afford to purchase what was needed from foreign countries. This would also make Germany dependent on others for survival and, more importantly, vulnerable to starvation in case of war. According to Liddell Hart, German documents reveal that Hitler was visited in November 1937 by Lord Halifax, who held the position of Lord President of the Council and ranked second in the Cabinet to the Prime Minister. During their conversation, Lord Halifax led Hitler to believe that Britain would allow him free hand in Eastern Europe to pursue his desire for *lebensraum*. "As these documents show, these events precipitated Hitler's action. He thought that the lights had changed to green, allowing him to proceed eastward. It was a very natural conclusion."⁶ Hitler was convinced that with the controlled will of the people and the "green light" from Britain, nothing could prevent his dream of *lebensraum* from becoming a reality.

Hitler's Grand Strategy?

Hitler's political maneuvers prior to the Second World War highlight the question: Did all of these actions represent a premeditated grand strategy or were they just situations that presented themselves with a low risk of confrontation with other nations? Without a doubt, Hitler wanted to dismantle the Treaty of Versailles. "Every power-seeking politician in the country, including Adolf Hitler, spokesman of the upstart National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi Party), attacked the treaty."⁷ This platform, combined

with Hitler's almost hypnotic talent as an orator, facilitated his rise to power and control over Germany's destiny which he felt he, and he alone, should control. H. R. Trevor-Roper best captures Hitler's belief in himself as the only one with the capability to restore the lost German empire to her greatness when he states:

Hitler distrusted his successors, as he distrusted his predecessors, who had been too soft. Only he, he believed, 'the hardest man in centuries', had the qualities for such a 'Cyclopean task': the vision, the will-power, the combination of military and political, political and 'world-historical' insight. Therefore the whole programme of conquest, from beginning to end, must be carried through by him, personally. Nor could it be left to his subordinates, his generals. He distrusted his generals too. Like all professional soldiers, they disliked the prospect of great wars. Military parades, quick victories in limited campaigns—these were part of their business; but a major war of revenge against the West, or a major war of conquest against the East, was a prospect that alarmed them. It alarmed them as soldiers; it also alarmed them as conservatives. To envisage such a war with confidence one had to be, not a conservative Prussian staff-general, but a revolutionary nationalist, able to command obedient, if reluctant, generals: in fact, a Hitler.⁸

Hitler was committed and driven by *his* obsession for power and *his* pursuit of *lebensraum* to the point of resorting to war if his objectives could not be obtained by political means. The grand strategy to attain those objectives, however, followed more closely to that of an opportunist than of a grand strategist. This does not mean that Hitler's strategy was *ad hoc*; it simply implies that each step was taken one at a time to test the waters before proceeding to the next. With the will of the people behind him, Hitler began to make his vision a reality.

The West, and more specifically France, was unsure of Hitler's long range plans for Germany and apprehensive to say the least with regard to the future state of affairs. In order to quiet the fears of the West, Hitler signed a non-aggression pact with Poland in January of 1934 which he used as a major propaganda victory and frequently cited as an

example of Germany's peaceful intentions. "The pact with Poland is a perfect example of Hitler's intuitive genius and of the way in which he was able to manipulate his foreign audience much as he had done with his domestic audience."⁹

With the West temporarily at ease with Hitler's actions, his next move was directed against the Treaty of Versailles. In March of 1935, Hitler announced to the world that Germany would no longer honor the disarmament clauses of the treaty and reinstated military conscription. One year later, on March 7, 1936, Hitler sent a poorly equipped and undermanned German army marching into the Rhineland. This action was in direct violation of Articles 42, 43, and 44 of the treaty which had created a "demilitarized zone" in the Rhineland and barred any German military activity within 50 kilometers of the Rhine River. Hitler's generals were so assured that France would go to war over the Rhineland that they had prepared an evacuation plan to save as many German troops as possible from their inevitable fate. Hitler, however, went ahead with *his* plan ignoring their concerns and regained the territory without a shot being fired. Surprisingly, the French and the British, whose combined strength could have stopped Hitler in his tracks, did nothing more than voice their disapproval of Germany's actions, which meant in effect they looked the other way. Hitler again seized the moment and in order to prove to the rest of the world that his future intentions were indeed peaceful, proposed a twenty-five-year non aggression pact with France. The world breathed easier once more while Hitler scored yet another diplomatic victory.¹⁰

The next two years passed by without any further indication of Hitler's overt conquest for eastward expansion. During this period, however, Hitler continued to strengthen his military forces to a point where he felt confident enough to make his next

move—Austria. On March 12, 1938, Hitler decided to send German troops into Austria at the request of Seyss-Inquart, the leader of the Austrian Nazi party, under the premise of restoring order to the land. As the German army crossed the border, they were met by cheering crowds of Austrians welcoming their arrival. Hitler himself went to Austria that same day to proclaim the union of Austria and Germany. He gave the Austrians an opportunity to vote on the union in early April and an overwhelming majority (over 99 percent of the voters) voted in favor of the reunification of Austria with the German Reich effective as of March 13, 1938. Again, the British and French Governments seemed to condone Hitler's march into Austria by not taking any action against him.¹¹

Czechoslovakia was next on Hitler's agenda. After World War I, over 3.2 million Germans were left in the region of Czechoslovakia called the Sudetenland. They claimed they were being mistreated by the Czech people and government and wanted nothing more than to be reunited with their German homeland. When Hitler informed his staff of his plans to take the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, General Ludwig Beck, the Chief of the General Staff, was convinced this action would lead to Germany's ruin and resigned from office. Hitler, inspired by his own self-confidence and against the advice of his generals, decided that Britain and France would not go to war over the Sudetenland and threatened to use force against the Czech government if they refused to recognize the Sudeten Germans' demands for independence. His bold statements sparked the fear in Europe of yet another war. On September 29, 1938, Britain and France agreed to a meeting with Hitler in Munich sponsored by Mussolini to try and resolve the situation through peaceful means. The Soviet Union and, more importantly, Czechoslovakia were not invited to attend the meeting. Britain and France agreed to Hitler's terms regarding

the German occupation of the Sudetenland and were confident peace was once again to be maintained. This appeasement did not last long and on March 15, 1939 Hitler decided to send in his troops and occupy what was left of Czechoslovakia.¹²

Within a matter of days after Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia, Britain and France publicly announced their commitment to defend Poland against Hitler's aggression if he decided to move against her. Britain's sudden hard line stance against Hitler may have been due to Prime Minister Chamberlain's embarrassment after Hitler's violation of the Munich Agreement in which Chamberlain felt "the pressure of public indignation, or his own indignation, or his anger at having been fooled by Hitler, or his humiliation at having been made to look a fool in the eyes of his own people."¹³

Despite repeated proclamations that Britain and France would defend Poland, Hitler was confident they would not interfere with his plans. To bolster his confidence, Hitler signed the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact with Joseph Stalin on August 22, 1939. Hitler's decision to arrange the pact with Stalin proved to be mutually beneficial to both parties. Stalin was more than willing to sign the agreement since he felt the West was trying to isolate him by excluding the Soviet Union from the Munich proceedings. Hitler, on the other hand, was now assured that if war was inevitable, the Soviet Union would not be a factor against him thus, insuring victory for Germany.¹⁴

Up to this point, Hitler's quest for *lebensraum* had been accomplished by purely political means. His self-confidence and arrogance had grown to the point that everyone and everything around him appeared to be unimportant since he was the one who, against the advice of his generals, masterminded each and every critical, bloodless, and unchallenged victory for Germany without going to war. Hitler saw himself as a true

military genius—a master of strategy and tactics unlike the conservative generals who served under him.¹⁵

Notes

¹ Anthony De Luca, *Personality, Power, and Politics: Observations on the Historical Significance of Napoleon, Bismarck, Lenin, and Hitler* (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1983), 94.

² *Ibid.*, 95.

³ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

⁴ Walter C. Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 46.

⁵ De Luca, *Personality, Power, and Politics*, 96, 107.

⁶ B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: Putnam's, 1970), 7-9.

⁷ James Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late And Other Blunders That Cost Him The War* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 4.

⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945*, edited by H.R. Trevor-Roper (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), xv-xvi.

⁹ De Luca, *Personality, Power, and Politics*, 112.

¹⁰ Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late*, 5-6, 8 and De Luca, *Personality, Power, and Politics*, 112-113.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7 and 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7-8 and 115-116 and Hart, *History of the Second World War*, 6-7.

¹³ Hart, *History of the Second World War*, 11.

¹⁴ Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late*, 11 and De Luca, *Personality, Power, and Politics*, 116.

¹⁵ Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late*, 19 and Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, translated by Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: Dutton & Co, 1952), 436.

Chapter 2

Hitler As A Military Leader

Strengths

Although Hitler will always be remembered for the atrocities he caused during the Second World War, he did possess several strengths that are characteristic of a good military leader. Hitler had the uncanny ability to commit precise details to memory, particularly historical information, technical facts, economic statistics, and past personal experiences. “It enabled him to retain inessentials exactly and to store away everything he ever saw: his teachers and classmates; the figures in the Wild West stories of Karl May; the authors of books he had once read; even the brand name of the bicycle he had used as a courier in 1915. He also remembered the exact dates of events in his political career, the inns where he had stayed, and the streets on which he had been driven.”¹ To compensate for Hitler’s lack of education in the technical field, he would read everything that was put in front of him. David Irving is unsure if Hitler had a secret method which enhanced his power of memory but does offer the following as an example of Hitler’s retentive ability:

When the Red Book of arms production reached him each month, he would take a scrap of paper and, using a colored pencil selected from the tray on his desk, scribble down a few random figures as he ran his eyes over the columns. Then he would throw away the paper—but the figures remained indelibly in his memory—column by column, year after year—to confound his bureaucratic but more fallible aides with the proof of their

own shortcomings. One month he pounced on a printing error in the current Red Book: an “8” instead of a “3.” He had remembered the right figure from the previous month’s edition.²

Hitler’s amazing memory also served him well in his ability to comprehend technical matters and problems with armaments. His knowledge of guns, tanks, ships and their capabilities as weapons of war benefited Germany’s war fighting machine. Hitler was credited with the idea of mounting 75-millimeter long-barrel guns in German tanks and pointing out the flaw in German warship design in which the forecastle was built so low that it would dive beneath the waves in heavy seas. He was well versed in the armament and speed of German and foreign warships as well as where demolition charges should be placed on canal bridges for the greatest effect, how thick the concrete should be in fortifications, and the type of guns that should be used on the Norwegian fjords. Hitler had a firm grasp on the capabilities of the gasoline engine and was always interested in other technical areas, specifically in the production of synthetic materials. He could instantly recall the effect of the enemy’s latest weapon systems and figures pertaining to German and enemy war production. He relied heavily on civilian professionals to run his armament program since he felt military technologists were lazy, bureaucratic, and backward. Hitler’s technical ability and direct contributions to the war effort are even more amazing due to the fact that he never received any formal education in technology and did not have a background in industry.³

Hitler credited his military leadership to the experience he gained as a common soldier in the First World War where he received the coveted Iron Cross Second Class and also the Iron Cross First Class which was one of Germany’s highest decorations during that period. Hitler believed, based on his personal experience, that he could view the battle

from a soldier's perspective and understood how the common soldier felt when fighting on the front lines.⁴

Field Marshal Erich von Manstein credits Hitler with a number of characteristics essential to military leadership such as a strong will, nerves of steel, and undeniable intelligence. However, Manstein does not agree with Hitler's self-proclaimed sense of identification with or compassion for the common soldier.

Hitler was always harping on his 'soldierly' outlook and loved to recall that he had acquired his military experience as a *front-line-soldier*, his character had as little in common with the thoughts and emotions of soldiers as had his party with the Prussian virtues which it was so fond of invoking. Hitler was certainly quite clearly informed of conditions at the front through the reports he received from the army groups and armies. In addition, he frequently interviewed officers who had just returned from the front-line areas. Thus he was not only aware of the achievements of our troops, but also knew what continuous overstrain they had had to endure. Losses, as far as he was concerned, were merely figures which reduced fighting power. They were unlikely to have seriously disturbed him as a human being.⁵

Hitler also possessed the ability to adjust his conversation to the mentality of his audience. He could discuss highly technical matters with industrialists, engage in political conversations with diplomats, or simplify complex problems to a level easily understood by the common working class. Hitler used this talent to build his self-confidence by not allowing himself to feel intimidated when surrounded by those of a higher educational or cultural background and could comfortably discuss such topics as art, music, or literature. Hitler also used this skill when he wanted to persuade someone to accept his point of view. He always knew why a person wanted to see him before they arrived and had his counter-arguments so well prepared that the individual would leave convinced that Hitler's logic was sound and not unreasonable.⁶

Weaknesses

An analysis of Hitler's strengths reveals the very foundation of his weaknesses. His exacting memory enabled him to recall specific details from earlier briefings presented by his officers, and they had to be careful that what they told him in the future completely agreed with what they had told in the past. If Hitler detected any deviation from what he was previously briefed, he immediately assumed his officers were intentionally trying to deceive him. This assumption continued to convince Hitler that his officers could not be trusted. By not trusting them, Hitler took away the very essence of leadership—allowing subordinate commanders the freedom to make decisions based on their experience and knowledge of the battlefield.⁷ However, Hitler's unrelenting conviction that he alone should control Germany's destiny is best described by H. R. Trevor-Roper who explains:

He did not, like the men of 1914, 'blunder into war': he went into it with his eyes wide open. And since his eyes were open, and other's half shut, or smarting from the dust which he himself had thrown in them, he was determined that he alone should control his war. He alone understood his whole policy; he alone could vary its details to meet circumstances and yet keep its ultimate aims and essential course constant; and war, which was but policy continued by other means, was far too serious a business to be left to generals, or indeed to anyone else.⁸

Hitler's distrust for his generals was based upon the success he had achieved in the early war years which, more often than not, was attained against the advice of his military experts. Based on these seemingly easy victories, Hitler's self-confidence grew to the point that he began to view himself as a great military leader, or even more specifically—a true military genius. This overconfidence, combined with the extreme mistrust of his generals, became the driving force behind Hitler's intricate involvement in military matters down to the minute detail. To prove the point, Hitler organized his Supreme Command so

that no one was in a position to advise him on grand strategy or even draft a war plan without his direct involvement. The Operations Staff of the O.K.W., which was originally designed to perform this function, became nothing more than an avenue for Hitler to use to distribute his orders to the military commanders. The commanders, in turn, had no input into the making of grand strategy and often had no idea what troops were being assigned to different areas of responsibility.⁹ This, of course, led to numerous heated arguments between Hitler and his subordinate commanders to the point that many either resigned or were replaced if they failed to agree with Hitler's decisions. Trevor-Roper offers the best example of Hitler's involvement in the details of battle and the strict control he held over his commanders:

‘I must point out,’ Hitler would inform his commanders-in-chief on all fronts during the Allied advance in Western Europe, ‘that the maintenance of signals communications, particularly in heavy fighting and critical situations, is a prerequisite for the conduct of the battle,’ and he insisted that his harassed generals report to him all their orders, ‘so that I have time to intervene in this decision if I think fit, and that my counter-orders can reach the front-line troops in time.’¹⁰

Hitler's confidence in his military leadership ability, however, was filled with flaws. His military experience during the First World War, to which he was so fond of referring, was very limited. He lacked the experience of commanding troops in the field and never served as a staff officer which severely handicapped his ability to assess and analyze a military situation logically from the viewpoint of a seasoned military officer. Hitler consistently deployed troops into combat with complete disregard for such matters as supply, logistics, and sustainment. Once new weapon systems were developed, Hitler's only concern was seeing that they were dispatched to the front as soon as possible without considering whether the men responsible for the equipment had been fully trained or if the

weapon had been tested under combat conditions prior to its use. Hitler's constant comparison of Germany's war production with that of his enemy failed to take into consideration the capabilities of the weapons being produced. As a result, Hitler refused to accept any reports of his enemy's superiority, no matter how reliable the reports may have been, and would counter these assertions by pointing out the deficiencies of the enemy as compared to Germany's production figures.¹¹

Hitler's leadership principle of holding on to every inch of territory once conquered, otherwise known as his "no retreat policy," can be traced back to his experiences as a corporal in the First World War. Hitler witnessed how easily the fighting troops would retreat to established defense lines behind them rather than continue to fight and hold the ground they had already won. According to Percy Schramm:

For Hitler, defense lines to the rear exerted a "magnetic" force on the fighting troops, and one should never tempt them by prematurely preparing defense lines behind them. Hitler never forgot how easily the troops could break into a stampede once they had been squeezed out of the trenches, and how hard it was to stop the infantryman, the "poor worm" as he called him, in open country. What Hitler had learned in 1917-1918 was that it seemed better to hold on to present positions, no matter how high the casualty rate, no matter how vulnerable to air attacks and artillery fire, no matter how weakened by localized breakthroughs, than to order the troops to fall back across open country to the next defense line, though it might be operationally more favorable.¹²

A major fault in Hitler's military leadership was his belief that victory on the battlefield could be attained merely through the power of his own will. Hitler was convinced that if his will could be felt by the youngest soldier on the battlefield, they too would understand the significance of his decisions and success would certainly be achieved. Field Marshal von Manstein does agree that a supreme commander must have a strong will to be victorious and that battles have been lost when a leader's will failed him

at the critical moment. However, he feels Hitler's overestimation of his own will directly influenced his battlefield decisions to the point that he refused to face reality and accept advice from those around him.

The will for victory which gives a commander the strength to see a grave crisis through is something very different from Hitler's will, which in the last analysis stemmed from a belief in his own 'mission.' Such a belief inevitably makes a man impervious to reason and leads him to think that his own will can operate even beyond the limits of hard reality—whether these consist in the presence of far superior enemy forces, in the conditions of space and time, or merely in the fact that the enemy also happens to have a will of his own.

In the face of his will, the essential elements of the 'appreciation' of a situation on which every military commander's decision must be based were virtually eliminated. And with that Hitler turned his back on reality.¹³

Hitler was convinced his success in the political arena and rise to power was directly attributable to the power of his will. Therefore, he felt if his initial success was testimony to his will power, this same will power could be used to achieve success as a military leader and on the battlefield no matter what the odds were against him. This belief served only to lengthen the distance between Hitler and his generals. If success was obtained, it was through the power of his will; failure, on the other hand, was due primarily to his generals' lack of conviction to his will.

Decision Making Process

While Hitler tried to present himself as a very decisive leader who meticulously planned each and every step of his grand strategy, quite the opposite was true. When faced with a difficult decision, Hitler procrastinated for days and sometimes weeks before he would resolve the situation and announce his decision. It was during these periods that Hitler wanted to be left alone and not be bothered by his immediate staff. He would often

lock himself in his room alone and pace back and forth for what seemed to be miles on end. Hitler would sometimes leave Berlin without telling anyone and go to Berchtesgaden to be by himself so as not to be distracted by unwanted intrusions. His mood would change dramatically and was often ill-tempered and depressed. He did not care to discuss the matter with anyone and would ignore those around him until he had reached his decision.¹⁴ Field Marshal von Manstein stated that Hitler would procrastinate “every time it was urgently necessary for us to commit forces to battle in time to forestall an operational success by the enemy or to prevent its exploitation. The General Staff had to struggle with Hitler for days on end before it could get forces released from less-threatened sectors of the front to be sent to a crisis spot.”¹⁵

Hitler did not approach decision-making in a logical, well-thought-out manner. The logical method of decision-making involves gathering the facts, determining possible alternatives to the problem based on the facts, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative, and then selecting the best alternative. Hitler’s process was just the opposite. Once he had reached a decision, either through intuition or some other means, Hitler would then gather facts to support his decision. Once he felt comfortable and convinced his decision was undeniably correct, he would call in his adjutants, no matter what time of the day or night, to listen to him until he was finished. Next he would call in his General Staff and present his decision to them in what appeared to be a rational, well-organized manner. Once his decision was made, it was almost impossible to change his mind. If anyone dared challenge Hitler’s decision or judgment, he would become very angry and at times break into a rage, thus preventing any further discussion on the matter.

Once his plan of action was accepted by his General Staff, his mood would change and he would become cheerful and approachable once again.¹⁶

Notes

¹ Percy Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader* translated by Donald Detwiler (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 70.

² David Irving, *Hitler's War* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 87.

³ *Ibid.*, 86 and Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader*, 103-105 and Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, edited and translated by Anthony Powell (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 274.

⁴ Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader*, 10, 108.

⁵ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 280-281.

⁶ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, translated by Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: Dutton & Co, 1952), 430-432 and Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 285-286.

⁷ Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader*, 70 and Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 285.

⁸ Adolf Hitler, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat: Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945*, edited by H.R. Trevor-Roper (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), xvii.

⁹ Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader*, 134 and Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 283.

¹⁰ Hitler, *Blitzkrieg to Defeat*, xxiv.

¹¹ Irving, *Hitler's War*, 113 and Alan Bullock, *Hitler A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams Press, 1952), 611 and Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 275-280.

¹² Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader*, 154.

¹³ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 276-277.

¹⁴ Walter Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 72-73 and James Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late And Other Blunders That Cost Him The War* (New York: Praeger, 1991), xii.

¹⁵ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 278.

¹⁶ Langer, *The Mind of Adolf Hitler*, 73-76.

Chapter 3

Hitler's Military "Mistakes"/"Blunders"

Dunkirk "Stop" Order

One of the most controversial questions in the history of World War II surrounds the infamous "stop" order issued in the last days of May 1940 which allowed the British Expeditionary Force (over 338,226 men including 26,176 French) to escape from Dunkirk. The controversy is based upon two separate questions. First, was Hitler solely responsible for the decision to stop his advancing army at the gates of Dunkirk, or did General Gerd von Rundstedt make the decision and Hitler merely agree with him based on Rundstedt's military expertise? The second question, and perhaps the most debated among military historians and military leaders alike, is why was the stop order issued at all?

In response to the first question, there seems little doubt that Hitler did in fact insist that the stop order be issued on his own behalf. Hitler was already nervous over the ease at which his armies had successfully advanced into France and was quite concerned by the lack of overwhelming resistance his armies continued to encounter. All of this seemed too good to be true and only served to heighten his concern, since he was not sure what the French and British might be planning from the south. Hitler's uneasiness was reinforced

when he visited Rundstedt's Army Group A Headquarters on May 24th. Rundstedt informed Hitler that he was concerned about the way the tank strength had been reduced during the long and expeditious advance across France and, more importantly, the possibility of further engagements with the enemy from the north and the south. Hitler agreed with Rundstedt's reservations and wanted to save his panzer force for future operations. He could not risk losing them fighting in the Flanders marshes. Although undoubtedly inspired by Rundstedt's shared concern over the condition and strength of the panzer forces, the decision to halt the attack of the armored force at the Canal Line and not allow any further advances beyond that point was made by Hitler alone. Later that day after meeting with Rundstedt, Hitler called for the Commander-in-Chief of the Army and after a heated discussion, insisted that the tanks be halted and the infamous stop order was issued.¹

There remains one further argument that lends itself to support the fact that it was Hitler's decision to issue the stop order and not Rundstedt's overwhelming influence over him as some may assume. After the British did escape from Dunkirk, Hitler never tried to lay the blame of his mistake on the advice of his generals as he had so often done in the past. As Liddell Hart states, "Such negative evidence is as significant as any."²

The final question of why Hitler issued the stop order offers several possibilities. Hitler was convinced from his own personal experience during the First World War that the muddy Flanders terrain was not suited for heavy armor. The marshes were crisscrossed with canals and drainage ditches which made tank maneuver hazardous and vulnerable to heavy losses if they fell prey to British or French attack. Hitler wanted to save as many tanks as he possibly could for his battle against the French and his march

into Paris which was the next phase of Hitler's plan—the defeat of the French Army. Therefore, Hitler saw no sense in squandering his tank force in the swampy lowlands of the Flanders marshes, or for that matter, destroyed in the streets of Dunkirk when they could be put to better use in the future.³

The most compelling argument behind Hitler's issuance of the stop order was Field Marshal Hermann Goering's assurance to Hitler that the Luftwaffe was more than capable of single-handedly stopping the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) at Dunkirk. Hitler saw this as an opportunity to save his precious panzer force from the hazards of the Flanders region and give Goering a chance to score a decisive victory for his Luftwaffe. Goering's insistence that the Luftwaffe could finish the job without the aid of the army may have influenced Hitler's decision as well since a victory by Goering would surely deny the army generals from reaping the glory of the triumph. Therefore, with assurances from Goering and Hitler's concern over the possible heavy loss of tanks to the Flanders region, Hitler issued the stop order with the understanding that Dunkirk would be left to the Luftwaffe.⁴

Hitler's decision to allow the Luftwaffe to destroy the BEF on the shores of Dunkirk completely contradicts the assertion of those who may have felt Hitler had political motives for issuing the stop order. It has been suggested by Liddell Hart, through an interview with Blumentritt who was Rundstedt's operational planner, that Hitler may have intentionally allowed the BEF to escape from Dunkirk in order to make peace with the British easier to achieve. This assumption is based on Hitler's visit to Rundstedt's headquarters on May 24th in which Blumentritt recalls:

Hitler was in very good humor, he admitted that the course of the campaign had been ‘a decided miracle,’ and gave us his opinion that the war would be finished in six weeks. After that he wished to conclude a reasonable peace with France, and then the way would be free for an agreement with Britain.

He then astonished us by speaking with admiration of the British Empire, of the necessity for its existence, and of the civilisation that Britain had brought into the world. He remarked, with a shrug of the shoulders, that the creation of its Empire had been achieved by means that were often harsh, but ‘where there is planning, there are shavings flying’. He compared the British Empire with the Catholic Church—saying they were both essential elements of stability in the world. He said that all he wanted from Britain was that she should acknowledge Germany’s position on the Continent. The return of Germany’s lost colonies would be desirable but not essential, and he would even offer to support Britain with troops if she should be involved in any difficulties anywhere. He remarked that the colonies were primarily a matter of prestige, since they could not be held in war, and few Germans could settle in the tropics.

He concluded by saying that his aim was to make peace with Britain on a basis that she would regard as compatible with her honour to accept.⁵

If Hitler truly believed that by allowing the BEF to escape from Dunkirk would have eased peace relations with Britain, he would have never ordered Goering’s Luftwaffe to attack. According to General Heinz Guderian, “Hitler and above all Goering believed German air supremacy to be strong enough to prevent the evacuation of the British forces by sea.”⁶ The opportunity for the Luftwaffe to inflict serious casualties on the enemy by bombing them from the air during their escape attempt certainly had merit.

Hitler’s army generals, on the other hand, were completely appalled when they received the order that Dunkirk was to be left to the Luftwaffe. Manstein later wrote that, “Dunkirk was one of Hitler’s most decisive mistakes.” He goes on further to express his discontent by stating, “Hitler had a certain instinct for operational problems, but lacked the thorough training of a military commander which enables the latter to accept considerable risks in the course of an operation because he knows he can master them. In this case,

therefore, Hitler preferred the safe solution of defensive action to the bolder method suggested by Army Group A.”⁷ Guderian was also perplexed when he received notification of the stop order and stated, “On this day (the 24th) the Supreme Command intervened in the operations in progress, with results which were to have a most disastrous influence on the whole future course of the war. *Hitler ordered the left wing to stop on the Aa.* It was forbidden to cross that stream. We were not informed of the reasons for this. The order contained the words: ‘Dunkirk is to be left to the Luftwaffe’....We were utterly speechless.”⁸

The true reasons for Hitler’s historic decision to issue the stop order will never be known. Just as this account is nothing more than speculation, the fact remains that over 336,000 men survived to fight another day. Telford Taylor best summarizes the events as they occurred at Dunkirk:

And so, while the British were preparing and commencing the greatest naval rescue operation in recorded history, Hitler and the generals wrangled about the stop-order and busied themselves with plans for the approaching offensive on the Somme–Aisne front. The stop-order would not have been issued but for the failure to grasp the urgency of cutting the Allies off from the coast before the resourceful might of British sea power could be brought to bear in a huge salvage operation. The reprieve of the stop-order was the prelude to “the deliverance of Dunkirk.”⁹

Stalingrad “No Retreat” Policy

Hitler’s unrelenting policy of no retreat at Stalingrad cost thousands of German soldiers’ lives. According to James Duffy, “It was a policy of fanatical resistance. On October 14, 1942, Hitler issued this order to his troops: ‘Every leader, down to squad leader must be convinced of his sacred duty to stand fast come what may even if the

enemy outflanks him on the right and left, even if his part of the line is cut off, encircled, overrun by tanks, enveloped in smoke or gassed.”¹⁰

Hitler’s decision to hold Stalingrad at all costs can be attributed to a similar situation he faced in Moscow during the winter of 1941. The Soviets had launched a counter-offensive against the German army on December 6 and Hitler’s generals saw no other option available for their armies other than a massive retreat to establish a more defensible position and even counterattack. Against the advice of his generals, Hitler categorically refused any request to withdraw and issued the order that the German armies were to stand firm and fight to halt the enemy offensive. Those officers who refused to follow Hitler’s orders were either dismissed or court-martialled.¹¹ Hitler based his decision on the fact that “any large-scale retreat by major sections of the army in midwinter, given only limited mobility, insufficient winter equipment, and no prepared positions in the rear, must inevitably have the gravest consequences.”¹²

Even though thousands of German soldiers died from further Soviet attacks and frost-bite, the German army held out until the spring thaw and did not allow the Soviet army to break through their front lines. During this time, Hitler managed to reinforce his armies, provide the desperately needed winter clothing for his troops, and salvage most of the heavy equipment which enabled him to resume the offensive in 1942.¹³

Many of Hitler’s generals did not agree with his decision at the time, but now feel it was his greatest accomplishment of the war based on the results of his no retreat policy. General von Tippelskirch, a corps and later army commander, stated: “It was Hitler’s one great achievement. At that critical moment the troops were remembering what they had heard about Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow, and living under the shadow of it. If they

had once begun a retreat, it might have turned into a panic flight.”¹⁴ General Blumentritt also agreed.

Hitler’s fanatical order that the troops must hold fast regardless in every position and in the most impossible circumstances was undoubtedly correct. The withdrawal could only be carried out across the open country since the roads and tracks were blocked with snow. After a few nights this would prove too much for the troops, who would simply lie down and die wherever they found themselves. There were no prepared positions in the rear into which they could be withdrawn, nor any sort of line to which they could hold on.¹⁵

Hitler’s successful decision to overrule the requests from his generals to withdraw the troops from Moscow convinced him that his judgment was correct and, more importantly, that the best defense against an attacking Soviet army was simply to hold the ground and fight. Therefore, Hitler found it hard to tolerate or even consider his generals’ advice to withdraw troops in future engagements with Soviet forces. This was the premise Hitler used to justify his decision to hold Stalingrad at all costs a year later.¹⁶

On November 19, 1942, the Soviet army launched an offensive against the Sixth Army, commanded by General Friedrich Paulus, at Stalingrad. Hitler’s Army Chief of Staff, General Kurt Zeitzler, tried to convince Hitler to allow Paulus to withdraw from Stalingrad before his army was completely surrounded by Soviet forces and then attack the Soviets from the rear in order to overcome the offensive. Hitler became infuriated with Zeitzler and refused to grant his request.¹⁷ On November 21, Hitler decided that the Sixth Army must hold their ground “despite the danger of its temporary encirclement” and ordered Paulus to stand firm.¹⁸ The following day, Paulus found himself completely surrounded by two Soviet pincer units. Hitler denied Paulus’ request to allow him the “freedom of action” to withdraw from Stalingrad to the west while he still had a chance to

break through the Soviet encirclement. According to Geoffrey Jukes, Hitler's decision enabled him to "continue in the belief, derived from his experience of the previous winter, that refusal to withdraw was the correct response to Soviet attacks."¹⁹

Hitler's decision also relied heavily upon Goering's boastful assurance that the Luftwaffe could airlift the badly needed food and ammunition to the Sixth Army and keep them resupplied so they could continue to fight. The necessary supplies, however, were not getting through and the airlift was clearly a failure. Paulus continued to keep Hitler updated on his lack of supplies and informed him that "the planes were no longer landing at Gumrak airfield; they were just throwing out their loads in midair. The loads were thus largely wasted, and the thousands of injured waiting to be flown out were left to suffer."²⁰ Even with this vital information, Hitler was determined to stand by his decision regardless of the outcome and continued to insist that Paulus hold his ground until the last man. Manstein's assertion that Hitler's character had little in common with the thoughts and emotions of the common soldier was certainly proven in this case. As Manstein points out, "The cause of Sixth Army's destruction at Stalingrad is obviously to be found in Hitler's refusal—doubtless mainly for reasons of prestige—to give up the city voluntarily."²¹

The Soviet army, on two separate occasions, had offered Paulus an opportunity to surrender. Paulus relayed the conditions to Hitler and asked for his permission to surrender stating that his troops were without food and ammunition, his wounded were in serious need of medical attention, and further defense was senseless. Hitler's response remained the same—hold your positions at all costs. In a vain attempt to ensure Paulus' loyalty, Hitler promoted him to field marshal on January 30, 1943, and reminded him that

no German field marshal had ever surrendered. However, on January 31, the final message from Paulus' headquarters stated that the Soviet army was at the door and the remaining equipment was being destroyed. Hitler learned early the next morning that Paulus had surrendered and over 90,000 German soldiers had been taken prisoner.²²

Hitler's prestige was shattered by Paulus' surrender and he could not understand how anyone could display such acts of disloyalty and ingratitude. On February 1, Hitler held his normally scheduled military meeting and expressed his disgust for Paulus' cowardly action.

The man should have shot himself just as the old commanders who threw themselves on their swords when they saw their cause was lost. That goes without saying. Even Varus gave his slave the order: "Now kill me!."

You have to imagine, he'll be brought to Moscow. There he will sign anything. He'll make confessions, make proclamations. You'll see: they will now walk down the slope of spiritual bankruptcy to its lowest depths....The individual must die anyway. Beyond the life of the individual is the Nation. But how anyone could be afraid of this moment of death, with which he can free himself from this misery, if his duty doesn't chain him to this Vale of Tears. No!

What hurts me most, personally, is that I promoted him to Field Marshal. I wanted to give him this final satisfaction. That's the last Field Marshal I shall appoint in this war. You mustn't count your chickens before they are hatched. I don't understand that at all. So many people have to die, and then a man like that besmirches the heroism of so many others at the last minute. He could have freed himself from all the sorrow and ascended into eternity and national immortality, but he prefers to go to Moscow. What kind of choice is that? It just doesn't make sense.²³

It also made no sense for Hitler to insist that Stalingrad be held until the last man and was clearly a mistake in judgment on Hitler's behalf. Hitler believed that his military genius would again prevail over the advice of his generals. What Hitler failed to realize, however, was that his successful decision to stand firm and fight during the winter months of Moscow could not be applied to every situation as *status quo* each time he found his

armies confronted by Soviet forces. The circumstances Paulus faced at Stalingrad were not the same as those encountered by the German army at Moscow. Hitler's decision in early November for Paulus to hold Stalingrad and not withdraw removed any possibility for the Sixth Army to break through the Soviet lines and fight from a more defensible position while they were still combat capable. Hitler was also convinced that airlift would provide the food and ammunition needed to continue the fight and that reinforcements would soon arrive to assist Paulus in annihilating the Soviet forces. The reinforcements, however, never arrived. Field Marshal von Manstein's troops were unable to reach Stalingrad and were driven back by strong Soviet counter-attacks. The two closest airfields had been overrun and the Luftwaffe's attempt to resupply Paulus' army by air failed miserably. Once the Sixth Army was overwhelmed by the Soviet forces, Paulus was left with only two options: either fight to the death or surrender. He chose to surrender.

Stalingrad marked the end of Hitler's obsessive attempt to conquer the Soviet Union at the cost of roughly two hundred thousand German lives. Later that summer, the Soviet army launched a massive counter-offensive, from which the German army never recovered. According to Duffy, "Following the defeat at Stalingrad there would be no more blitzkriegs. There would be no more advances, only a steady retreat across eastern Europe until the German army was forced back to where it began in 1939: Germany itself."²⁴

Notes

¹ B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: Putnam's, 1970), 80-81 and Telford Taylor, *The March of Conquest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 255, 259, 263 and Alan Bullock, *Hitler A Study in Tyranny* (London: Odhams Press Limited, 1952), 537.

² Hart, *History of the Second World War*, 81.

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³ Ibid., 82 and Taylor, *The March of Conquest*, 262 and Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle France 1940* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 533-534 and David Irving, *Hitler's War* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 121.

⁴ Horne, *To Lose a Battle France 1940*, 533-534 and Taylor, *The March of Conquest*, 263 and Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, edited and translated by Anthony Powell (Chicago: Regnery, 1958), 124.

⁵ B.H. Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: William Morrow, 1948), 134-135.

⁶ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, translated by Constantine Fitzgibbon (New York: Dutton & Co, 1952), 120.

⁷ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 124-125.

⁸ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 117.

⁹ Taylor, *The March of Conquest*, 264-265.

¹⁰ James Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late And Other Blunders That Cost Him The War* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 149-150.

¹¹ Bullock, *Hitler A Study in Tyranny*, 609-610.

¹² Irving, *Hitler's War*, 357.

¹³ Ibid., 366 and Bullock, *Hitler A Study in Tyranny*, 610.

¹⁴ Hart, *The German Generals Talk*, 189.

¹⁵ William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 868.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 23.

¹⁷ Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late*, 90.

¹⁸ Irving, *Hitler's War*, 455.

¹⁹ Jukes, *Hitler's Stalingrad Decisions*, 19, 177.

²⁰ Irving, *Hitler's War*, 476.

²¹ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 290.

²² Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late*, 91, 151-152 and Percy Schramm, *Hitler: The Man and the Military Leader* translated by Donald Detwiler (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), 113.

²³ Bullock, *Hitler A Study in Tyranny*, 632.

²⁴ Duffy, *Hitler Slept Late*, 91.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

The analysis of Adolf Hitler as a military leader has revealed a very complicated man who placed his own self-interests above his country, its people, and the rest of the world. Millions of people would die from his quest for *lebensraum* and the world would again go to war. Hitler was convinced that he, and he alone, was capable of restoring Germany to her rightful place among other nations throughout the world. Hitler's early success in the war, against the advice of his generals, served only to verify his belief that he was indeed a true military genius. As the war lingered on, however, his leadership began to falter.

What these findings also point out is that on more than one occasion Hitler could have been stopped in his tracks if Britain, France, and the rest of the world had not stood idly by and allowed him to gain the confidence he needed to continue his expansion to the west. The world's tolerance of Hitler's actions, therefore, reinforced his self-esteem as a military leader and allowed him to implement his opportunistic strategy one step at a time. Hitler's repeated violations of the Treaty of Versailles should have indicated that he had more in mind than just protecting Germany's sovereignty.

Hitler's strengths as a military leader and the contributions he made to Germany's war effort cannot be overlooked. His phenomenal memory and keen eye for detail enhanced his ability to comprehend technical matters and problems with armaments. His

extraordinary ability to assess the advantages and flaws of military weaponry resulted in major improvements in German tank and warship designs. Hitler's technical insight was even more remarkable due to the fact that he did not have a technological or industrial background. Hitler was not only an avid reader of military history, he also kept himself well-informed of his enemy's capabilities such as current weapon systems development and war production figures—admirable characteristics of good military leadership.

Hitler's weaknesses, however, far outweighed his strengths. His mistrust of his military leaders made him suspect their recommendations and only served to strengthen his conviction that he, and he alone, knew what was best for Germany. This led to his intricate involvement in military matters down to the minute detail. He failed to allow his commanders in the field the freedom to make decisions based on their experience and knowledge of the battlefield. Hitler's military leadership was hampered by his lack of experience in commanding troops in the field which impaired his ability to assess and analyze a military situation from the viewpoint of a seasoned military officer.

Hitler's decision making process was marred by procrastination and failure to involve his military leaders in matters of strategic importance. He was often secluded and did not approach problems in a logical manner—in fact just the opposite. Once he reached a decision on an issue, he would search for facts to support his decision. His greatest flaw in this area was his determination that his decision was final, therefore making it almost impossible to change his mind even if the facts supported a different solution.

Dunkirk and Stalingrad provide excellent examples of Hitler's inability to rely on his generals' advice which resulted in two diametrically opposed outcomes. At Dunkirk, thousands of British and French soldiers' lives were saved when Hitler issued the stop

order. The battle of Stalingrad, on the other hand, saw thousands of German soldiers lose their lives by Hitler's insistence to hold the ground to the last man.

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