

The Value of Hitler's Brilliant Generals  
Patrick Long

The post World War II mystique that developed in the US military regarding top Wehrmacht generals such as Field Marshal Erich von Manstein or General Heinz Guderian connotes an aura of brilliance and honor in the conduct of German military operations on the Eastern Front. Within their memoirs, both Manstein and Guderian contend that plans and operations throughout the war would have concluded in Germany's favor (or at least more so) were it not for Hitler's meddling in operational affairs. These German military leaders employ what has become a common argument in the study of WWII history: blame Hitler for all Germany's military failures. In addition, these memoirs make little mention of the atrocities committed by Germany; but instead emphasize impeccable Wehrmacht conduct on the Eastern Front. Closer examination of both Manstein's and Guderian's experience on the Eastern Front does not fully support their claims of honorable conduct by either them or the forces under their command in that theater.

At the same time, convincing arguments purport that while Hitler assumed ever increasing amounts, and ultimately the bulk, of the blame for Germany's woes as the war progressed, the German General Staff shared some of this blame as well. The question then becomes: what is the value of Manstein's or Guderian's writings—these supposed military geniuses—when their war conduct was far less than honorable and Hitler cannot shoulder all the blame for Germany's defeat? Can these German leaders still be considered militarily "brilliant?" Despite the myths of honorable conduct and Hitler's complete blame for defeat, the value of Manstein and Guderian for students in the postwar age, when considered objectively and separated from questions regarding their conduct, lies in their generalship, their conceptions of operations themselves regardless of any potential use of hindsight in documenting these lessons.

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Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies make a convincing argument refuting the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” in their book, *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. They contend that Manstein and Guderian, like many of their prominent General Staff contemporaries, sought postwar to restore the honor of the German armed forces by painting a picture of law abiding operations in the East. With such a goal in mind, these authors claim both Manstein and Guderian, within their memoirs, present “half-truths, lies, omissions, and distortions . . . alongside truth.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding the “truths,” and their value to the student of operational art, first requires an understanding of the fallacies these German leaders created.

Manstein and Guderian promote the first fallacy of honorable and completely unsullied Wehrmacht conduct unabashedly within their writings. Manstein claims within his memoirs the “Commissar Order” “threatened not only the honor of our fighting troops but also their morale. Consequently, I had no alternative but to inform my superiors that the Commissar Order would not be implemented by anyone under my command.”<sup>2</sup> Smelser and Davies argue the Field Marshal’s claim of refusing the “Commissar Order” represents one untruth as Commissars were executed by the 11<sup>th</sup> Army while he was in command.<sup>3</sup> Smelser and Davies also point out that while Manstein was apparently “shocked to hear about the murder of the Jews,” testimony at Nuremburg revealed that the Field Marshal had requested the SS turn over the wrist watches of massacred Jewish civilians as gifts for the front line troops.<sup>4</sup> Other documentary evidence at Nuremburg implicated Manstein, along with other senior leaders, in issuing orders to the troops “in which they urge the ruthless extirpation of the ‘Jewish-Bolshevik’ system.”<sup>5</sup> Such arguments clearly refute Manstein’s claim to honorable conduct in the East.

Guderian also has black marks from Smelser and Davies on his honorable Wehrmacht claims; though admittedly the arguments against him appear more circumstantial vice the

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tangible ones laid directly against Manstein at Nuremburg. Most notably, however, the authors point out the improbability of Guderian's claim within his memoir of dealing "with the problem of supplying the homeland, the Army and the Russian civilian population with food."<sup>6</sup> Guderian then writes, "The needs of the troops were assured as were those of the Russian civilians in the towns."<sup>7</sup> This was possible, according to Guderian, because "the 1941 harvest had been a rich one throughout the country."<sup>8</sup> Smelser and Davies make the logical, though not directly supported argument, "The 1941 harvest could hardly have been a rich one because the Ukraine, Russia's breadbasket, was the scene of ferocious battles during that period."<sup>9</sup> Along a different vein, Smelser and Davies argue Guderian's claimed ignorance of Nazi practices until 1943 rather improbably due to established testimony in other Nuremburg cases regarding the close coordination and operation between the SS, civil authorities and the army.<sup>10</sup> Again, the authors present another plausible point, though one not directly supported. Arguments such as these, as well as those harbored against Manstein, provide reasonable clarity on the fallacy of the "clean Wehrmacht" on the Eastern Front. However, as will be shown, the overall argument weakens when proof of dishonorable conduct is assumed to equate to poor operational leadership as well.

The tendency of Wehrmacht generals in their post WWII testimonies to lay the defeat of Germany solely at Hitler's feet represents another area of contention. Both Manstein's and Guderian's memoirs continually blame Hitler throughout their individual accounts of the Eastern campaign and their reasoning has merit, especially as the war progressed. Hitler was notoriously slow in his decisions, which only served to increase the precariousness of the German situation. However, the German General Staff, to include Manstein and Guderian, limited themselves in thought and planning to their own operational area while in command. Within those areas, they would often push in one direction while Hitler would push in another. This was best exemplified

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by the General Staff's desire to take Moscow, while Hitler wished to hit fielded forces and strike toward Leningrad.<sup>11</sup> The General Staff's views were also limited strictly to operations, to the exclusion of political and economic considerations. Smelser and Davies attribute this to another means of "cleaning" the Wehrmacht's reputation because it avoided descriptions of the motivations for the Eastern campaign, which were obviously genocidal in nature.<sup>12</sup> Ultimately, from the campaigns outset the General Staff, along with Hitler, never understood the hard fact that "the Germans, even at this early stage, were attempting too much."<sup>13</sup>

So the question again returns to the value of Manstein's and Guderian's post war teachings in light of the fact they were war criminals who contributed to Germany's defeat. In fact, Manstein and Guderian demonstrated excellent operational leadership when considered in perspective. To understand Manstein's or Guderian's brilliance their military operations must be considered separately from the war crimes they were party too or purportedly knew about. Smelser and Davies seem to extend the fact Manstein committed war crimes, or that Guderian covered up knowledge of them, as evidence that they were poor military commanders. Such logic alone does not pass scrutiny as unfortunately in Manstein's or Guderian's case, war criminals *can* excel at military operations.

Along this vein, Smelser and Davies go one step further by unjustly laying certain failures at the feet of these two military leaders. As an example, they attribute the perpetual delay of the 6<sup>th</sup> Army's breakout at Stalingrad on Manstein, as the overall operational commander.<sup>14</sup> Other notable historians such as Alan Clark argue that Hitler, in conjunction with Paulus (the 6<sup>th</sup> Army's Commander) pushed for the delays in the hope that unit could hold its ground through air resupply while at the same time claiming it lacked the fuel resources to attempt the breakout.<sup>15</sup> In Guderian's case, Smelser and Davies claim Guderian "exaggerates his

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unwillingness to continue the attack on Moscow in late 1941.”<sup>16</sup> They claim he instead advocated for a continued attack to maintain the gains of the summer and set overly ambitious goals for his forces. They write, “Only a month later [(which would be late December)], he decided that they were overexposed and ordered a retreat on his own.”<sup>17</sup> Again Clark's account does not support these assertions. By the later part of November, Guderian's recognition of both the shortage of supplies and the weather prompted him to demand a change in his order since he “could see no way in carrying them out.”<sup>18</sup> Guderian argued that he could not proceed and the attack should be cancelled to allow German forces to assume suitable winter positions. He understood German forces could no longer attack in the dead of Russian winter, whilst their opponent could. Though these German military leaders were not without their flaws, as pointed out in their association with war crimes, they were still incredibly competent operational leaders.

This leads to the second part in understanding Manstein's or Guderian's value: while their vision of grand strategy was lacking, strictly within the realm of military operations, these German military leaders were brilliant. In Manstein's case, it was his plan in the West which conquered France in a little over a month. His successful operation to retake Kharkov in March of 1943 restored the German front lines in the wake of the Stalingrad disaster. According to Clark, this operation both demonstrated German superiority and “recovered [the German army's] moral ascendancy.”<sup>19</sup> It was Manstein who correctly saw the delays in launching Operation Citadel had doomed it to failure.<sup>20</sup> Smelser and Davies state simply that Manstein was in favor while Guderian opposed the operation.<sup>21</sup> According to Clark, Manstein supported this approach initially as an immediate follow up to his victory at Kharkov.<sup>22</sup> In the face of continual delays caused by Hitler, Manstein's position shifted over time from lukewarm support to direct opposition.<sup>23</sup> Such an assertion also overlooks the fact Manstein initially conceived of an

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alternative to the Citadel operation, called the “backhand plan.” If the Citadel plan was the best, why would Manstein formulate, or continually advocate for, an alternative? Alan Clark describes “Manstein’s ‘backhand’ plan [as] brilliant in conception, and might well have resulted in one of the most classically perfect battles of *riposte*.”<sup>24</sup> Although not above reproach, Manstein did prove his brilliance within the operational realm.

Guderian likewise proved his brilliance in his conduct of operations, and as Inspector General of German armored forces. As Clark describes him, “Guderian was the tank general par excellence; more than Manstein, O’Connor, [or] Model, with a cooler nerve than Rommel or Patton, he knew how to handle an armored division.”<sup>25</sup> It was Guderian’s forces who turned Manstein’s plan in the West into reality. Guderian was one of the leading prewar advocates among the General Staff who warned against, and even wrote about, the superiority of Russian equipment, later embodied in the T-34. As Inspector General of Armored Troops, Guderian proposed a consolidation of tank forces into a lesser number of fully strengthened units to counter this Russian superiority. These reforms were turned down by the parochial General Staff at large. As such, “the development of the Panzer force was stunted at the outset.”<sup>26</sup> These reforms were designed to allow the German army to operate in the manner which brought them success in virtually every operation up to Stalingrad—namely *maneuver* warfare. Guderian subsequently realized as the war dragged on German forces could no longer, in the face of Russian numerical and technical superiority, maneuver forward, but instead must conduct maneuver operations back. A course that neither he, nor Manstein could convince Hitler was necessary to take to save Germany in some fashion.<sup>27</sup>

To fully appreciate the brilliance of Manstein or Guderian, a student of the operational art must understand the truths within their experiences, *not* focus on these leaders themselves.

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Students therefore must understand that Manstein's or Guderian's memoirs attempt to sell a particular image of their experiences, as well as themselves. An additional criticism (and potential student pitfall) of these leaders stems from the fact their accounts were naturally created in the war's postscript and therefore they have the opportunity to revise anything which could make them appear "un-brilliant." Being able to understand the overall operational situation and reflect on what should have happened represents a form of brilliance—regardless of how these leaders see or portray themselves. More importantly, these reflections, understood in their proper context, reveal the truths and lessons valuable to students wishing to better understand operational art.

Though the myth of the "clean Wehrmacht" perpetuated by Manstein and Guderian post WWII has begun to fade and the Wehrmacht's deplorable actions have been revealed, this does not mean these German military leaders have nothing to offer a student of history or the operational art. Nor does the fact that the General Staff bears some blame normally attributed to Hitler mean Manstein or Guderian were therefore poor combat leaders. With the proper perspective these leaders' genius can be appreciated. While they should not be venerated as honorable soldiers, and they are not without their flaws, as operational commanders they truly were brilliant.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Eric von Manstein. *Lost Victories*. (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2004) 180.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 97.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Heinz Guderian. *Panzer Leader* (New York, NY: DeCapo Press, 2002) 249.

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- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 249.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 249.
- <sup>9</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 105.
- <sup>10</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106.
- <sup>11</sup> Alan Clark. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945*. (New York, NY: Perennial, 1965) 77.
- <sup>12</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 96.
- <sup>13</sup> Alan Clark. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945*. (New York, NY: Perennial, 1965) 76.
- <sup>14</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 94.
- <sup>15</sup> Alan Clark. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945*. (New York, NY: Perennial, 1965) 273.
- <sup>16</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 104.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid., 104
- <sup>18</sup> Alan Clark. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945*. (New York, NY: Perennial, 1965) 175
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 306.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., 327.
- <sup>21</sup> Ronald Smelser and Edward Davies. *The Myth of the Eastern Front*. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 94.
- <sup>22</sup> Alan Clark. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-1945*. (New York, NY: Perennial, 1965) 323.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., 325-327.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., 312.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., 71.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 315.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., 412.