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# The Round Tablette

*Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)*

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## Happy New Year and welcome to the January session of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.

The weather outside fits well with our topic on the Eastern Front. Tonight's speaker is Professor Jonathan House, of the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is the author of *Combined Arms Warfare in the Twentieth Century* (2001) and *A Military History of the Cold War, 1944-1962* (2012), with co-author David Glantz, he has written a number of books, most notably *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (1995).

Until the end of the Cold War in 1990, NATO fully expected to engage the Warsaw Pact forces. Much of this terrain was fought over by the Wehrmacht from 1941. The US Army's leadership thought that we might learn from the mistakes the Germans made, starting in OPERATION BARBAROSSA. They brought together a number of captured German generals and had them explain why the Red Army defeated the "superior" Wehrmacht. This evening's discussion is not so much about particular historical events as it is a discussion of how and why (purpose) history is written and its importance as a discipline.

Armed with their perceptions, experiences, and biases, but without documents, the captured Germans, who survived the war, wrote their version of victory and defeat on the Eastern Front. The American military took their writings as the gospel. These analyses were one-sided, since there was never an analysis from the Soviet perspective, and documents were lacking. Soviet archives were not open even to most Soviet historians, let alone western historians like A.J.P. Taylor or Harold C. Deutsch.

In the post-war period, the American military and the historical community let the losers write the history of the critical campaigns they had lost. (Analogously, Southerners dominated the writings on the American Civil War Historical literature for the first hundred years.) Gathering the former German officers into research teams, with Former German Chief of Staff General Franz Halder as the unofficial editor, they prepared the Department of the Army's German

## Report Series:

*Russian Combat Methods in World War II* (1950); *German Defense Tactics against Russian Breakthroughs* (1951); *Operations of Encircled Forces: German Experiences in Russia* (1953); and *Military Improvisations during the Russian Campaign* (1951).

The memoirs of the German generals also enjoyed great popularity in this period and were read for their lessons of combat in the east. Almost all were apologies full of alibis, excuses, lies, and half-truths. Only in the last twenty years have most of these been given the scrutiny they deserve. Among the more popular memoirs were: F.W. von Mellenthin's *Panzer Battles* (1956), Heinz Guderian's *Panzer Leader* (1957), and Erich von Manstein's *Lost Victories* (1958).

These German generals essentially argued that they lost the war on the Eastern Front for three basic reasons. These have become basic to the teaching of World War II history; so much so that most people will immediately recognize them.

➤ First, they point to Adolf Hitler. "It was all Hitler's fault." This was an easy excuse since the Fuehrer was dead. It was the universal explanation for everything that was wrong with Germany from 1933 to 1945. However, it must be remembered that the German General Staff and the officer corps favored the invasion of the Soviet Union.

➤ Second, the severe weather and terrain of the Soviet Union defeated the Wehrmacht. This area was not unknown to the German commanders. The Prussian/German army had fought over this terrain for centuries. The officer corps studied the battles of Frederick Wilhelm the Great Elector, Frederick the Great, and Napoleon. Some had even fought on the Eastern Front in the Great War. They knew the weather and terrain, but their American counterparts did not, so it was easy for them to use that excuse. [Assuming the troops will be in Moscow before winter, that when you need certain supplies, they will be available in adequate quantities, etc., are hall-marks of General Staff planning for OPERATION BARBAROSSA. Ed.]

➤ Third, the numbers. The Soviet Army outnumbered the Germans. This was true, even when the German's were winning big in 1941.

The German officers could be forgiven for their "blindness" to the realities of OPERATION BARBAROSSA, since they were imbued for generations with the notion Robert Citino calls, "*Bewegungskrieg*" - a war

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of movement at the operational level. That is, with superior training, equipment, and discipline, the logistics of distance, supply, and demographics could be overcome with a "blitzkrieg" (lightning war) style victory. This might be called the "German Way of War."

What the Germans feared most was a "Stellungskrieg" - a war of position, (a static or trench style of fighting) which would turn into an attritional war, that the German nation would surely lose. The war on the Western Front in the Great War was a "Stellungskrieg." Robert Citino points to the December 26, 1941 issue of *Militar-Wochenblatt* - the official newspaper of the German Army to answer the question of when the Germans began to lose (or, lost) the war. The status update was: "*Der Stellungskrieg im Osten.*" (static war in the east).

It is important to note that the officers who wrote these reports, histories and memoirs were the commanders on the Eastern Front in 1941, not those from 1943 or 1944, those men were either dead or in Soviet prison camps. Their views would have been even more illuminating to historians.

Are these writings of the captured German generals worthless? Have American historians been duped for years by these excuses? The answer to each of these questions is no. These works provide insight into the German mind set as they prosecuted their war. It is obvious we can no longer interrogate them; their memoirs will have to suffice. These works can no longer be the sole source of our interpretations.

As for the first generation of post-war historians, they used the sources that were available to them. As times have changed and archives were opened up to Western scholars the historical analysis has gained complexity and the study of military history was reinvigorated by the work of people like Drs. House and Glantz.

**Further Readings:**

David M. Glantz & Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995)

David M. Glantz, *Operation Barbarossa: Hitler's Invasion of Russia, 1941* (West Midlands, UK: Helion & Company, 2012).

David Stahel, *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Richard Overy, *Russia's War: A History of the Soviet Effort: 1941 - 1945* (New York: Penguin Book, 1997).

Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht Retreats: Fighting a Lost War, 1943* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012)

Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

**Announcements:**

- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Jan. 21, 2014 – Grant – "Fight It Out" - [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - info@tccwrt.com
- St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Jan. 27, 2014 – Grant Before Vicksburg, D. Page - 715-386-1268 – [rossandhaines@comcast.net](mailto:rossandhaines@comcast.net)
- Rochester WWII History Round Table –507-280-9970; [www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org](http://www.ww2roundtable-rochester.org)
- Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
- Air Show - Eden Prairie - July 19-20, 2014; <http://www.airexpo-mn.org/> - 952-746-6100
- Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - [crazyjerry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjerry45@hotmail.com) - 651-338-2717
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - [www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.org) 651-455-6942
- Minnesota Air Guard Museum - [www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org) 612-713-2523
- Friends of Ft. Snelling, [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)
- Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644, <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

**Round Table Schedule 2014**

- 13 Feb. Encounters with WW2 Leaders
- 13 Mar. Operation COBRA and Falaise
- 27 Mar. World War II in China
- 10 Apr. Rabaul and the SW Pacific
- 8 May Landing on Omaha Beach
- 10-27 May Tour of Normandy

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