
The Round Table

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Welcome to the January session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight's speaker is Geoffrey Megargee, author of *Inside Hitler's High Command*. He will join with German veterans to discuss the functioning of the German military headquarters in the field.

The phenomenal successes of the German *blitzkrieg* and the professional excellence of the German army in World War II produced a vast literature on German military leadership: the leaders; their strengths and weaknesses; and their triumphs and failures.

The discipline and high quality training (until late in the war) of German officers and men was influenced in no small part by the traditions of the Prussian army. German officers adapted to the new military technologies of armored warfare and tactical air support far more quickly and extensively than their contemporaries in other countries. Indeed, the fundamentals of mobile warfare in the modern sense originate in ideas used to such great effect by such German generals as Erwin Rommel, Heinz Guderian, and Erich von Manstein in their offensive operations in Poland, France and Russia.

The General Staff also has a troublesome legacy that begins with the role the army (*Reichswehr*) played in the Nazi rise to power. Though the Versailles Treaty replaced the "General Staff" with a "committee," the institution arrangements continued. Throughout the Weimar Republic's existence, many senior officers, while publicly maintaining their apolitical stance, were secret monarchists at odds with the struggling democracy and resentful of the Versailles Treaty. Army leaders became conscious of the political importance of the army as they supported the weak Weimar government against various revolutionary movements.

The Versailles Treaty mandate of a 100,000 man army enabled such leaders as army Chief General Hans von Seeckt to only recruit officers and men who shared a common political viewpoint, making the Army at odds with the democratic leadership. The political machinations of

General Kurt von Schleicher led directly to the coalition that elevated Hitler to Chancellor in 1933. The *Reichswehr* was indirectly implicated in the Nazi "Night of the Long Knives" in 1934—the price of army support of Hitler was the executions of the top *Sturmabteilung* (SA, the party's security division) leadership which had threatened to replace the traditional armed forces with an SA-dominated "People's Army."

After the *Schutzstaffel* (SS, Hitler's personal bodyguard) established its supremacy over the SA, Reinhard Heydrich and Heinrich Himmler conspired to reduce the army's independence by removing Generals Werner von Blomberg and Werner von Fritsch. The failure of the Officer Corps to respond to the two scandals dealt a fatal blow to the General Staff's independence. It was left compromised, morally and institutionally. Dr. Deutsch and others have written extensively on the crisis in the General Staff caused by their co-optation into the Nazi State, and the rise of resistance to the regime by a precious few military leaders.

German military professionalism is seriously tainted by the war crimes and atrocities committed by German troops in service to the Nazi regime. This is a whole area of controversy among historians, particularly as after the war a myth of blaming the SS and the Nazis for all the war crimes was common in the writings and memoirs of army officers covering their past. Another area of controversy deals with how an army that achieved such successes was so completely and utterly defeated, raising major doubts over if the Germans could ever have actually won the war. This in turn has led to many spirited debates, which include post war recriminations blaming Hitler for poor military decision making and *ex post facto* apologies or excuse making for the German General Staff. The complex relationships between German senior officers among themselves and in relation to Hitler includes everything from generals who were sycophantic Nazis (Wilhelm Keitel) to conspirators seeking to take Hitler's life (Henning von Tresckow). Can one be a "good soldier" and patriot while serving a murderous genocidal state?

As gifted as the General Staff was for planning the *Blitzkrieg* and their innovative adoption of combined arms mobile warfare, the Germans had major blind spots which were

If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

exploited by their opponents. Significant staff and planning deficiencies have been revealed by many historians, including almost no strategic intelligence capability, defects in logistics planning, and inefficiencies in war production such as redundant or contradictory investments in weapons development. The lack of standardization of vehicles, tanks, and weapons hamstrung German operations in a logistical nightmare. For example, in 1943 German units used Panzer III, IVs, Panthers, Tigers as well as Czech 38(t)s, and captured French Char B1s, wholly lacking in common parts. With too few tank recovery vehicles, most German tanks could not be taken to depots for repair. In contrast, the Americans based their tracked vehicles on the standard Sherman chassis, and developed specialized support and recovery vehicles to keep their armor units rolling. For the Germans, just getting the parts that were available to the front was complicated: which parts to send where on the limited rolling stock? Emphasis on combat operational success with rapid victories concealed major weaknesses in their military logistics and organizational structure which were only revealed in a long war.

The most fatal flaw in the German General Staff went well beyond technical military questions, and involved the moral dilemma that tested all German officers. Hitler corrupted the Prussian tradition of discipline, obedience, and loyalty to their King by requiring all officers to swear an oath of loyalty to him personally, making them tacit accomplices in his criminal acts. Hence, when Hitler acted against their judgment or, more significantly, ordered the commission of war crimes, the General Staff found itself (with a few celebrated exceptions) powerless to object or resist. The battlefield brilliance of the General Staff in specific campaigns was in service of a hopeless grand strategy and the General Staff was a vehicle for the darker aspects of Hitler's world vision.

This moral dilemma makes the study of the General Staff problematic for today's historians. In purely military terms, the brilliant mobile operations of Manstein, Rommel, and Guderian are still studied in military academies worldwide. War crimes such as the 1941 *Kommissarbefehl* (summary execution of Soviet political commissars), assisting and participating in atrocities against civilian populations, or the army's steadfast support of the regime's "*Final Solution to the Jewish Question*," raises very profound moral questions for military professionals. Complicity with Nazi barbarity placed a permanent stain on the reputation of the German General Staff. Can one praise the genius of the inventors of modern

combined arms mobile warfare without also being conscious of the innocent murdered victims that resulted from these same victories? So much talent and genius directed to such ultimately criminal purposes: no wonder Colonel Claus Graf von Stauffenberg once described the General Staff as "idiotic."

FURTHER READINGS:

Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000).

Harold C. Deutsch, *Hitler and His Generals: The Hidden Crisis, January-June 1938* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).

Arden Bucholz, *Moltke, Schlieffen, and Prussian War Planning* (New York: Berg, 1991).

Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956)

Announcements:

Vietnam War Roundtable - 21 Jan. 2019 - *USN Destroyer Operations* - mnvietnam.org - rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 15 Jan. 2019 - *Civil War on the Great Lakes* - www.tccwrt.com - info@tccwrt.com

St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 28 Jan. 2019 - *Demographics of War* - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net

Civil War Symposium - 6 Apr. 2019 - info@tccwrt.com
Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-616-6050, <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-2523

8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130, <https://www.8thmn.org>.

Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org

World Without Genocide, 651-695-7621, <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>

Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN, 320-564-6644, Air show - 20 June 2020. <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.

Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - 13-14 July 2019 - www.wotn.org 952-746-6100

Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble - 30 Jan. 2019 - Cozzens, *The Earth is Weeping: ... Indian Wars* - sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com

Winston Churchill Book Club: Info: lin.hopkins@hotmail.com

Alliance Francaise, www.afmsp.org, 612-332-0436

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org 651-455-6942

We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2019

14 Feb.	Economics of War
14 Mar.	Aerial Reconnaissance of the Reich
28 Mar.	WASPs
11 Apr.	General with Six Stars: J. H. C. Lee
9 May	D-Day

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