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The Prosecution of Multi-Theatre Warfare

**An Analysis of the German
Military Leadership's
Attempt to Direct War in
Simultaneous Theatres**

A Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
History

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Illustrations

Between pages 64 and 65

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Sources

Photograph 6 from Matthew Cooper, *The German Air Force 1933-45*.

Photograph 2 from James S. Corum, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940*.

Photographs 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 25, 26, 29, 30, from Martin Gilbert, *Second World War*.

Photograph 21 from Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader: General Heinz Guderian*.

Photographs 22, 27, 28, from David Irving, *Hitler's War*.

Photographs 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 24, from Wilhelm Keitel, *Generalfeldmarschall Keitel: Verbrecher oder Offizier?: Erinnerungen, Briefe, Dokumente des Chefs OKW*.

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Photograph 7 from Erich Raeder, *My Life*.

Diagram 1 from Walter Warlimont, *Inside Hitler's Headquarters 1939-45*.

Glossary

'Ariel'	The Allied evacuations from Dunkirk
Auftragstaktik	Mission-orientated tactics
'Barbarossa'	The invasion of the Soviet Union
'Blau'	The offensive against the Caucasus
Blitzkrieg	Lightning War
'Citadel'	The Kursk offensive
'Felix'	The proposed conquest of Gibraltar
'Gelb'	The invasion of Holland and Belgium
'Hercules'	The proposed attack on Malta
Kesselschlacht	Encirclement battle
Kriegsmarine	German Navy
Luftwaffe	German Air Force
'Marita'	The invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia
'Merkur'	The invasion of Crete
Schwerpunkt	Place of main effort
'Seelöwe'	The proposed invasion of Britain
'Theseus'	The proposed attack on Libya
'Typhoon'	The assault on Moscow
Wehrmacht	German Armed Forces
'Weiss'	The invasion of Poland
'Weserübung'	The invasion of Denmark and Norway

Abbreviations

OKH	Oberkommando des Heeres (High Command of the Army)
OKL	Oberkommando der Luftwaffe (High Command of the Air Force)
OKM	Oberkommando der Kriegsmarine (High Command of the Navy)
OKW	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (High Command of the Armed Forces)
PLW	Polskie Lotnictwo Wojskowe (The Polish Air Force)
RAF	Royal Air Force (Britain)

Introduction

On 1 September 1939 Adolf Hitler convened a session of the Reichstag to announce war with Poland. Dressed in a grey field tunic, he declared that Polish aggression would be suppressed, and that he would wear the tunic until "victory is ours, or, I shall not live to see the day!"¹ Germany did not win the war, and Hitler did not live to see the day of its defeat. The established record of the Second World War adequately portrays what happened, and the chronology is ingrained. Nevertheless, aspects of the war have been neglected, especially in relation to command issues within the German armed forces. Because of the prominence of Hitler in all accounts, the actions of those below him have traditionally been marginalised. The purpose of this thesis is to address this 'gap' in history by evaluating the overall German military leadership's attempt to direct war in simultaneous theatres.

Using primary sources such as war diaries, memoirs, and various accounts of Führer conferences, this study will analyse how the unique German command structure eventually contributed heavily to Germany's defeat. While many authors hold Hitler solely responsible for defeat, and thus overlook the role of others, my work is primarily concerned with analysing the German High Command structure and its attempt to direct war on multiple fronts at the same time. Responsibility for eventual German defeat cannot be laid at Hitler's feet alone because while he maintained sole executive powers, he remained open to the suggestions of those in his inner circle. In the end, those figures, who will be discussed in this study, failed Germany because they were unable to present a united front against Hitler when the situation became critical for the armed forces after 1941.

Because of Germany's initial success, the perception of invincibility that Hitler so cherished became global and unquestionable. However, behind the facade, the world did not see the tensions between the individual services of the armed

forces regarding the conduct of operations. The tensions that would hinder German operations during the war were already festering during the formative stages of the post-Versailles armed forces. This inter-service conflict resulted from a proposal that the individual prerogatives of each service be denied in favour of a joint-service command structure.

In this proposal, unity of the services became preferable to individual action. On 21 May 1935, the adoption of unity in the German armed forces became official through the Military Service Act. Hitler reformed the Army, Navy, and Air Force High Command structures and stipulated that an umbrella organisation called the Armed Forces High Command would be made their superior. This organisation would plan and co-ordinate all operations, which Hitler would then order the three branches to execute. Thus, as early as 1935, the command structure that the German armed forces would use during the war was already in place.

In response to Hitler's move, the services roundly condemned the possibility that they might lose their traditional right to conduct independent operations. This resistance continued after he became Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces in 1938, even though it became somewhat muted. While the Wehrmacht advanced during 1939 and 1940, these tensions remained controlled. However, as the war situation deteriorated after 1941, the command structure increasingly became fragmented. Frequently, Hitler would have to mediate between feuding Commanders-in-Chief in an attempt to maintain unity. Paradoxically, he also worked against unity by skilfully using this tension to reinforce his position as Führer by adding more responsibilities to his portfolios. Hence, because of the situation, with Hitler as Head of both the state and military, when the armed forces became involved in simultaneous multi-theatre warfare, its command structure fragmented as the Führer lost control over the course of the war.

Integral to simultaneous multi-theatre warfare was the necessary maintenance of the Axis coalition by the Germans. Throughout the war this proved a problem. There were many instances of conflict over command responsibility, especially when Germany became involved in combined operations with Italy. Yet Hitler would not subordinate Italian forces to German command (despite the pleas of his generals) because he wished not to insult his ally, Benito Mussolini. Their inability to see their Axis allies as equals, as well as Hitler's inability to bring the Italians under full German command, combined to frustrate Germany's war effort. Furthermore, as the manpower and raw material situation deteriorated as the war became protracted, tension between Italy and Germany heightened when Italy continued to demand German resources that were sorely needed elsewhere.

The crux of my thesis is the way the German leadership responded to the stress of conducting warfare on several vast, and diverse, theatres simultaneously. Hence, the purpose of this study is not an evaluation of Hitler as Supreme Commander. Undoubtedly, he limited Germany's chances of ultimate success because of his inability to allow others, who were possibly more qualified than him, to make crucial decisions regarding operations. However, this thesis will focus on the command structure beneath Hitler, and its direction of the war, with the purpose of highlighting command, control, and communication problems brought on by multi-theatre warfare. Nevertheless, Hitler will often feature in this study because without him it is doubtful whether Germany could have returned to a position of dominance in Europe in the first place.

Hitler's penchant for the innovative, and unusual, protected the new idea of unity from the condemnation of the conservative Army. Furthermore, Hitler adopted advances in armoured tactics, the use of air power, and radical operational plans such as that used against France, despite the fervent objections of his advisers. Initial German success gave those disenchanted with the direction of the war no grounds for opposition, while Hitler gained an exaggerated

impression of his powers. To all, the German command model appeared revolutionary; and it was. To this day it remains apposite. Nevertheless, this study will highlight that while this might be true in theory, in practice, the model had many inherent flaws and tensions. Therefore, while the German command structure remains relevant, during the Second World War, because of its leading personalities, it contributed heavily to Germany's defeat.