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# The German Army 1933-1945: Its Political and Military Failure

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Casablanca, Roosevelt's vision of the postwar world, American anticolonialism, and Roosevelt and Eastern Europe. Kimball's last essay is a moderately successful attempt to tie earlier essays together under the rubric of "This Persistent Evangel of Americanism." The author concludes that Roosevelt was an "Americanist"—a lifelong proselytizer of the American values from which his assumptions derived.

This book demands considerable knowledge of both mid-century American foreign policy and Franklin Roosevelt. It will not be particularly useful to the general reader, especially given its patchwork of disparate essays. It is aimed more at professional historians (indeed, many of the essays were originally presented at various conferences) who will also appreciate its copious notes. Nonetheless, the individual essays are coherent and well worth reading.

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Cooper, Matthew. *The German Army 1933-1945: Its Political and Military Failure*. Chelsea, Md.: Scarborough House, 1990. (Reprint 1978) 598pp. \$17.95

This unrevised paperback edition is welcome because of its innovative emphasis on two major points: the myths of Germany's military excellence and of its successful institutionalization of fighting power.

Cooper was among the first English-language scholars to challenge these prevailing ideas. Despite the German army's spectacular offensive successes between 1939 and 1941, and the tenacity of its defensive operations in the war's later years, that army incorporated fundamental deficiencies that were never overcome.

According to Cooper, *blitzkrieg* was not even a German military expression, much less a German war-fighting doctrine. The German way of war was initiated by Frederick the Great and refined in the nineteenth century under Moltke the Elder and Schlieffen. Germany's emphasis on quick, decisive "battles of annihilation" bore only a superficial similarity to the twentieth-century concept of armored warfare based on the indirect approach. One emphasized physical destruction, the other depended on paralysis. One required coordinated flanking and encircling movements, while the other demanded speed and unpredictability.

Cooper argues that the differences between the older concept and the new amounted to a complete reversal of the rules of warfare as understood and applied in the German army. It was hardly surprising that the officer corps was skeptical of such a revolutionary new concept, particularly since Germany lacked the material resources to implement an armored war. Instead, a limited amount of twentieth-century weaponry was incorporated into a massive conscript army that was organized on principles developed under Kaiser Wilhelm:

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division after division of foot-marching infantry, whose artillery and first-line transport remained horse-drawn to the end of the war. The logistical limitations alone of such a force made nonsense of any so-called “Blitzkrieg strategy,” to say nothing of the inability of Hitler’s vague philosophies of war and the art of command to alter the army’s essentially traditional *mentalité*.

However, the crux of Cooper’s argument is how the army’s moral—as opposed to professional—weakness was crucial to its disastrous performance in World War II. The army struck an early bargain with Hitler in the hope of using National Socialism to preserve and enhance the military’s special position in German society. The inability of the its leaders to mount any consequent resistance to Hitler prior to 1939 reflected less naiveté about the Nazi system than complicity with it. This manifested itself most clearly and brutally in the army’s systematic collaboration with the Reich’s genocidal policies in Eastern Europe, when Jews, communists, and Slavs became foes not merely to be defeated but destroyed.

Perhaps senior officers feared the consequences of the army’s behavior. A *Generalität* divided, facing a population and an army it believed still loyal to Hitler, could not muster the collective will to act. What began as a betrayal of conscience ended as an abandonment of the professional responsibility that soldiers regard as

As Hitler assumed more and more responsibility for planning and decision-making, Germany’s military leaders retreated into a pose of *nur-Soldatentum* (“soldierliness”), denying any higher duty to the troops they led, the nation they served, or their own traditions.

Blind obedience had no place in the ethos of the German officer. Too few possessed the moral courage to challenge Hitler’s misuse of his powers as commander in chief. They justified their behavior with their fear of a German collapse and the ultimate triumph of Bolshevism. They entertained vague hopes of a postwar settling of accounts with the “Bohemian corporal” and his minions.

In the final analysis, the German officer corps prostituted itself and its calling with the substitution of obedience for responsibility. The German army lost its last and greatest war when it sacrificed its honor and its soul.

No armed force can afford to neglect this lesson: professional competence and ethical behavior are symbiotes, not opposites. Limitations in one area reinforce and reflect shortcomings in the other.

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