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Review Essay

The Germans and the Exercise of Military Power

SAMUEL J. NEWLAND

For the historian specializing in German military history, the last few years have been a busy time. The continuing fascination with the German military, particularly in World War II, has generated a rash of new books in the field in the last two decades. Scholars, history buffs, and professional soldiers continue to analyze the German genius in war and the pitfalls that caused their disastrous defeats in the 20th century. This interest in a nation that has fielded a formidable army or had designs to expand its influence with the military element of power is not without precedent. Consider that Rome, from republic to the empire, continues to intrigue a legion of scholars and aficionados throughout the world. Great Britain, with its later military ventures and global empire, provides a more recent example. But from the perspective of the 20th century, the Germans seem to be the most intriguing and the most studied. Despite the volume of books, articles, and monographs already in print, new and even original interpretations of the Germans and their military continue to appear.

Three respected military historians have recently added their scholarship to the intrigue about the German military and have provided new perspectives to the burgeoning bibliography on this subject. German Colonel Karl-Heinz Frieser, the Director of the World War I & II Department at the Military Research Institute in Potsdam, Germany, has written a book that provides a refreshing interpretation of German military practice in the early part of World War II. Frieser, an accomplished historian as well as a *Bundeswehr* officer, originally had this seminal book published in 1995. Titled *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West*, the book was unavailable to most English-speaking readers until recently, when it was translated with the help of retired US Army historian John Greenwood. The English translation was released in 2005 by the Naval Institute Press. The book is the German Army's official history of the 1940 German campaign against France and the Low Countries. As the title suggests, the author questions the traditional interpretation of the German way of war as practiced in World War II, generally described as "blitzkrieg."

Frieser invested a tremendous amount of research in writing this book, as evidenced by its 44-page bibliography. His research includes an impressive number of original archival sources from the German and French records. The author challenges what originally began as media-based hype during the Polish campaign, concerning what was described as a new method of warfare. Defined in the Western press

in 1939-40 as blitzkrieg, this popular description of the early war campaigns gave an erroneous view of the German practice of waging war. Blitzkrieg, in analyses of the period, was portrayed as a revolutionary doctrine. A key characteristic of this supposed new type of warfare was the combination of German military prowess with the capabilities provided by the internal combustion engine. Thus, blitzkrieg allowed concentrated mobile forces to punch through the enemy's defenses and rapidly exploit the breakthrough, stunning the enemy so that it could not conduct effective countermeasures. The misconception that blitzkrieg was a new kind of war based on revolutionary doctrine continued into the postwar years, and it is a view still held by many today.

Frieser, however, concludes that this traditional interpretation is wrong. After all, even a cursory review of German force structure shows that their army was not the mechanized force that some think. It used significant numbers of horses for both supply and in transporting weapon systems. In reality, there was no revolutionary doctrine which allowed the Germans to so quickly vanquish their enemies. Rather, it was the German ability to wage war at the operational level that set them apart from their adversaries. Granted, the enhancement of the traditional German war of movement—*Bewegungskrieg*—through the use of German air power and armor assuredly took advantage of these force multipliers. So did the capabilities of commanders like Heinz Guderian who recognized and seized opportunities that were not a part of the established campaign plan. Frieser concludes that these capabilities, combined with Allied mistakes during the campaign and the Allied inability to function rapidly at the operational level, permitted the Germans to succeed in the 1940 campaign. Frieser also concludes that in actuality the war plans on both sides were quite good, but that the German Army used its traditional way of war, effectively incorporating modern technology and initiative on the field.

In another new book, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*, author Robert Citino, an award-winning historian from Eastern Michigan University, in many respects complements and chronologically expands Colonel Frieser's work. Rather than looking at a focused, shorter period in history, Citino provides an analysis that is quite ambitious, addressing some 300 years of military practice. Citino analyzes what he calls *The German Way of War*, essentially exploring the same theme as Frieser. His analysis, however, begins with the age of Frederick William I, the Great Elector, and proceeds through the practices of Frederick the Great, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Wars of German Unification, before concluding with the 20th-century and German practices in both world wars. Within these wars (other than the First World War) he finds a consistent theme, an emphasis on wars of movement. According to his analysis, there is a continuity in the Prussian and later the German way of war. Wars and campaigns within these wars were to be conducted rapidly. As described by Frederick the Great, the best method for Prussian success was for wars to be "short and lively." Such wars were necessary because Prussia and subsequently Germany were small countries and were surrounded by larger and, certainly in the earlier period, more powerful neighbors. The Prussians and Germans did not have the manpower or the resources to wage lengthy wars, or wars of attrition. Furthermore, they could not afford to give up land for time, as could some of the larger nations.

Citino tracks the tradition of the short but violent campaign from the Great Elector's practices through the German victories of 1939-41. His narrative includes both the practice of the military art, as seen through military campaigns, and a survey of German military literature. Citino—and, for that matter, the Germans of the 1920s—found World War I (a classic example of positional or attritional warfare) to be an aberration to the German way of war. As Citino notes, during that conflict the Germans demonstrated advanced expertise in defensive operations. After the war, however, German military studies and strategists rejected the concept of positional warfare. In the postwar studies conducted by the *Reichswehr*, the undesirability of positional warfare was reaffirmed and the traditional German way of war—campaigns of movement and strikes into the enemy's flank—was emphasized. Germany simply could not afford attritional conflicts; these it would surely lose.

Citino's study, much like Frieser's, demolishes another myth which exists in military literature. This myth, perpetuated in recent years by American military practitioners, is the misconception or misuse of the term *Auftragstaktik*. As described in American military literature, *Auftragstaktik* is the practice whereby a senior German commander would provide mission-oriented orders to subordinates, then give them the necessary latitude to accomplish the mission in what they judged to be the best way possible. The German Army, however, seldom used this term. In fact, during the last 25 years, the American Army has likely used the term more than the German Army did in its heyday. Instead of operating with mission-type orders, the German operational commanders, at least until Hitler's heavy hand restricted them, had a considerable degree of independence during a campaign. This independence gave commanders on the operational level the latitude to take advantage of rapidly emerging opportunities, altering plans on the spot when necessary.

While Frieser's and Citino's works are complementary, a wholly new contribution to the literature on Germany's military can be found in Richard DiNardo's *Germany and the Axis Powers: From Coalition to Collapse*. With this book, DiNardo, a professor of national security affairs at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College and a consistent contributor on German military affairs, provides a solid addition to the literature of the period. He gives readers a scholarly and insightful look at Germany's abilities to work with its allies. As suggested by the title, his study focuses on Germany's World War II alliances. The author intentionally excludes Japan from his study, but the choice to ignore the Japanese contribution to the Axis alliance is logical. The connection between Germany and Japan was so remote, and the two countries shared so little in common objectives and did such limited coordination and planning, that alliance hardly seems like an appropriate term for their World War II relationship. DiNardo's choice to focus on the European powers—specifically Germany, Italy, Finland, Rumania, and Hungary—provides students of alliance warfare with a much better analysis.

Within this study there are some extremely interesting findings. Although the book's analysis is centered on National Socialist Germany, DiNardo provides the reader with a brief overview of Prussia, Germany, and coalition warfare from 1730 until 1933. After providing this brief background, he proceeds to the heart of his analysis, the National Socialist period. He concludes that meaningful cooperation between Germany and its allies was doomed from the onset, because within the alliances there

was a crippling lack of common interests or common goals. The alliances were in fact compacts between National Socialist Germany and each country, not a broad alliance with agreed-to objectives linking multiple nations. Even more accurately, they functioned as alliances between their military establishments rather than between the nations themselves.

To further complicate Germany's dysfunctional alliance system, there were no Tehrans or Casablanacas—no conferences to iron out differences and to develop common goals and common plans. In many cases, it was as if these so-called allies were waging war at the same time but in many respects independently, almost in different worlds. DiNardo also notes another serious problem: the failure of the Germans to create some type of unified command structure that would include all of the German services and somehow involve the military forces of Germany's allies. Thus, unlike the Western Allies, which waged their European campaign with the joint and combined headquarters of SHAEF, the Axis alliance had no real coordinative headquarters. In spite of these multiple shortcomings, the author notes that some German services (for example the navy) did better than others (the army). Similarly, some commanders, for example Erwin Rommel, were better than others at dealing with allies. The overall German record in coalition and alliance warfare, however, was poor.

DiNardo illustrates the problems mentioned by looking at selected campaigns—including Africa, the Balkans, and selected segments of Operation Barbarossa. Complementary to the theme promoted by the other two authors, DiNardo also highlights the fact that not only did German military minds not spend much time studying or emphasizing alliance and coalition warfare, their education and their emphasis was on operational and tactical thinking, not strategic. In many respects, this caused serious problems for the leadership of the two major Axis powers. Neither Hitler nor Mussolini was a strategic thinker.

As one reviews the concepts posed by the three authors in their excellent books, a picture emerges that is worthy of additional serious study. As demonstrated clearly through the work of Frieser and Citino, the Germans traditionally excelled in tactical and operational-level warfare. Conversely, DiNardo's book, together with the other two, raises two interesting questions: Can a nation in the modern world successfully wage war if its leadership is unable to work well within alliances and coalitions? And are tactical and operational victories enough if the nation lacks leaders who are logical strategic thinkers? Modern German history clearly provides lessons for all nations.

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