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Robert M. Citino, *The Wehrmacht Retreats: Fighting a Lost War, 1943*. Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2012. Pp. 428. ISBN 978-0-7006-1826-2.

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In *The Wehrmacht Retreats*, Robert Citino (Univ. of North Texas) continues his campaign to rescue the history of operational warfare from the dark shadows of academia. He has published extensively in the subject area for both scholarly and, increasingly, popular audiences.¹ More specifically, he has focused on the German approach to warfare. While the present volume may stand on its own, it would most profitably be read in conjunction with two of his previous studies—*The German Way of War* and *Death of the Wehrmacht* (see note 1). In this trilogy, Citino examines the use—both successful and unsuccessful—of *Bewegungskrieg* (war of movement) in various wars fought by the Prussian/German state. As the title here suggests, Citino is primarily interested in “how ... a military establishment historically configured for *Bewegungskrieg*—violent aggression, relentless assault, and mobile offensive operations—react[ed] when it suddenly and unexpectedly [found] itself thrown on the defensive” (xxviii) after Germany lost the initiative in World War II.

Citino concentrates on the Western Allies’ invasions of North Africa and Italy and the challenges faced by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front at Kharkov and Kursk to “describe the *mentalités* of the German military caste in a period when the fortunes of war had definitely turned against the Wehrmacht” (xxiv). While this approach has real merit and yields well-reasoned and important revisions of historical “truths,” the book’s rather informal tone and overemphasis on the Western Allies’ advances (as opposed to the Wehrmacht’s retreats) detract from the final product.

According to Citino, two common themes connected the military practices of Frederick the Great’s Prussia with those of the Third Reich: *Bewegungskrieg* and *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics) or what he more accurately renders as *Selbständigkeit der Unterführer* (the independence of the subordinate commander). A strategic situation seemingly always tilted in favor of its enemies forced the Prussian/German state to fight “rapid and decisive campaigns that identified, fixed in place, and then smashed the enemy’s main body within weeks of the outbreak of fighting.” Speed was complemented by the maneuvering of large formations, such as divisions or corps, to “strike the mass of the enemy army a powerful blow, perhaps even an annihilatory one, early on in the fighting” (xviii). In such a fluid environment, field commanders clearly needed the latitude to make independent decisions quickly, aggressively, and consistently. The Prussian/German military system ensured this by assigning General Staff officers to each field command. These men learned at German military institutions to analyze and correctly respond to battlefield problems. Led by officers who shared a “remarkably similar” outlook, Prussian/German armies sought out the flank or rear of an enemy force, then launched a violent assault designed to quickly annihilate it (xx). While this operational approach to warfare generally served the Germans well for over three centuries, the systemic flaws in the German way of war were exposed when the Wehrmacht “crashed into the realities of the industrialized warfare of the twentieth century” (xvii) at Stalingrad. The German operational response to this new situation is the subject of *The Wehrmacht Retreats*.

Citino’s argument is most evident in his examination of two German commanders as they confronted problems in their respective theaters of war: Field Marshal Erich von Manstein in the Soviet Union and Field Marshal Albert Kesselring in Italy. Manstein commanded German forces on the southern section of

1. His most important works include *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920–1939* (1999; rpt. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2008); *Quest for Decisive Victory: From Stalemate to Blitzkrieg in Europe, 1899–1940* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2002); *Blitzkrieg to Desert Storm: The Evolution of Operational Warfare* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2004); *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2005); and *The Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (Lawrence: U Press of Kansas, 2007).

the Eastern Front during the months immediately following the Soviet encirclement of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad.

Manstein's career [w]as emblematic of deep-seated problems within the German officer corps. Like virtually all of his colleagues, he was relentlessly focused on the operational level of war, he was hopelessly naïve about the nature of the enemies Germany was facing.... We might say Manstein saw modern war as a kind of bloody chess game, one that he could win simply by out-thinking his opponent, planning several operational steps ahead, and devising a combination that would rescue Germany from even the most hopeless position on the board. (50)

As he surveyed the near catastrophic situation facing the Wehrmacht in the southern Soviet Union in late 1942 and early 1943, Manstein realized he must retreat in order to stabilize the front, but this “was completely foreign to his nature, as it would have been to virtually all German staff and field commanders of his generation” (43). But, Citino writes, Manstein actually “was speaking the voice of aggression” (44) in his call for a withdrawal: he wanted to regroup his forces for the counterattack that delivered the famous back-handed blow that destroyed Red Army spearheads, recaptured Kharkov in the spring 1943, and regained, however temporarily, the initiative for the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front.

While historians have generally viewed this operation as the ultimate example of Manstein's operational genius, Citino writes that the field marshal “was not a completely free agent but the product of a long-standing military tradition” (72): the mobile operations, flank attacks, and long leash given subordinate commanders in the Kharkov operation were all in line with past practices. Further, the use of *Bewegungskrieg* only positioned the Germans on the edge of the “abyss” (74): though the front had been stabilized, the Germans were at a strategic dead end as the Kursk offensive of July 1943 all too clearly illustrated. Citino concludes that the traditional German way of war had proven ineffectual by 1943.

The same pattern played out across the crumbling Axis Empire: from Tunisia to the Kursk bulge, from Sicily to Salerno, German mobile operations faltered in the face of the Allies' superior numbers, overwhelming firepower, and maturing officer corps. Citino's discussion of the Wehrmacht's counterattacks at Salerno addresses a broader set of issues facing the Germans in 1943. Following the American landings, elements of two German Panzer Corps attempted to split the gap between Allied forces, then roll up and destroy the fragmented American units on the beaches. One destroyed bridge halted the seemingly unstoppable German advance and allowed the Americans to stabilize the situation through a combination of artillery fire, aerial bombardment, and the barrage of the heavy guns on US warships off the Italian coast. This firepower smashed the German Panzer divisions in the region, completely neutralizing their advantages in mobility and leadership. “At Salerno [the Wehrmacht] ... had come up against yet another army—clumsy, lacking finesse and elegance, but apparently in love with high explosives—that it could not vanquish. It was yet another way of war for which it could not formulate an effective response” (265).

Salerno revealed the drawbacks of the German way of war on the battlefield; the planning for Kursk, in particular, highlighted the complete bankruptcy of German operational thought. Faced with a large bulge into their lines, the Germans resorted to their tried and true tactic of concentric flank attacks by mobile units. But, the Soviets had transformed the Kursk salient into a World War I-era battlefield, with eight defensive lines, over 3000 miles of trench, and extensive minefields, but reinforced with Second World War weaponry: 5000 tanks, supported by 29,000 guns and mortars (134). Unsurprisingly, the German offensive bogged down, “enmeshed” in the Soviet defensive system (135). The Germans “had all become so intent on the *Kesselschlacht* [encirclement battle], on surrounding their enemy and then destroying him through a series of aggressive concentric operations, that they had become blind to the absurdities of trying to achieve one under these circumstances. They could literally see no other way of proceeding beyond a rote devotion to the historical German way of war, even when it no longer had a chance of success” (143).

One cannot dispute this assertion regarding the Kursk operation, but if reliance on *Bewegungskrieg* no longer ensured the Wehrmacht of victory, what other strategy might do so? Attrition seemed the only alternative. Citino identifies Kesselring as “one of the most important German commanders, [the] first ... who willfully and eagerly chose to fight a *Stellungskrieg* [static or positional war] that he knew he would never

abandon" (273). After taking command in Italy, Kesselring began a slow retreat up the peninsula, while the Allies continued their arduous and bloody advance, cracking through successive German defensive lines in central Italy, "one frontal assault after another" (270). While the Italian campaign was certainly neither an especially glorious nor even successful one for the Allies, its outcome for the Germans differed little from the results they experienced on the Eastern Front. German casualties numbered over 415,000, some 100,000 more than the Western Allies' losses—Citino rightly concludes that "even as a limited campaign of delay and attrition, the German defense of Italy was an utter failure" (272).

Despite Kesselring's failure, the Wehrmacht as a whole shifted from mobile operations to a strategy of linear defense during the remaining years of war, a trend encouraged by Hitler himself, who believed that the German way of war and its emphasis on mobility led to retreats. There was no shortage of men "who would stay put and stand fast where and when Hitler told [them] to" (282)—men like Kesselring, Ferdinand Shörner, and Walter Model, who led the German Army during the bloody, attritional defensive fighting of the war's final two years.

Although Citino's thesis is sound, his book's contents are rather unbalanced: four of its seven chapters deal with the war in the west, even though the Eastern Front consumed the lion's share of German resources and lives: "in 1943, all the great battles were taking place deep inside the Soviet Union" (265). Certainly, the operations in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy worsened the Reich's strategic situation, but the sheer scale of the fighting—and defeats—in the East hurt German interests far more than losing Sicily or the Italian boot.

This emphasis on the Allies' as opposed to the Soviets' military effectiveness is quite deliberate: "now that military history has finally begun to dispense with enthusiasm for any special German genius for war and to view the Wehrmacht's operations in a colder and more rational light, it would be a tragedy to substitute any special respect for Soviet war making. It was extraordinarily clumsy, wasteful of lives and manpower, and dangerous to its own men, as its huge casualty statistics would bear out for the rest of the war" (69).

Seen in this light, the unbalanced treatment of Soviet operations relative to German ones seems reasonable. But the chapters on the western theaters of war, however, give the Germans short shrift in favor of a focus on British and especially American planning. The first chapter, on Operation Torch and the race to Tunis, devotes twice as many pages (twenty) exclusively to the US military effort as it does to Axis operations. Citino is simply more interested in Allied military issues, ranging from command performance (Frendall in Tunisia and Clark in Italy) to inter-Allied relations, than in German operations. While his analysis is always cogent and welcome, it is odd that the Allied initiatives get more attention than the Wehrmacht's retreat, the ostensible subject of the book.

The Wehrmacht Retreats is directed primarily to a popular audience, which may account for its sometimes distracting colloquial tone. We read, for instance, of "teachable moment[s]" (66, 123) and that "the U.S. Army was putting on its game face" (11) and "World War II was a long war ... it covered the earth like a Sherwin Williams advertisement" (200). The conversational flavor is most problematic in the series of vignettes that set the scene for several chapters. Based on primary sources, they attempt to get into the minds of historical actors, ranging from Eisenhower to Hitler, Adolf Heusinger, and Frido von Senger und Etterlin, at times of crisis. While sometimes used to great effect in historical fiction, this narrative device is glaringly out of place in a serious work of history. Citino writes smoothly and engagingly enough to hold his readers' attention without resorting to such conventions.

These criticisms aside, the book is a well-written, broad survey of German combat operations in 1943. Drawing on a wide array of secondary sources and the writings of German officers in the immediate post-war era, Citino has delivered a fitting and perceptive epitaph for what he has identified as the German way of war.