



## *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke to Heusinger* by Gerhard P. Gross.

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Review by Michael Geheran, Clark University (mgeheran@clarku.edu).

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The twentieth-century German military and its “way of war” continue to be subjects of an ever-proliferating body of literature and lively controversy. Surprisingly, there has been no comprehensive study of German operational thinking in the period, specifically within the broader framework of economic, social, and political developments. In *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, Gerhard Gross, a colonel in the Bundeswehr,<sup>1</sup> seeks to rectify that omission. The book’s US publisher deserves high marks for producing this solid (uncredited) translation of the 2012 German original, equipped with many high-quality maps and a substantive foreword by noted military historian Robert Citino.

The volume’s first two chapters helpfully clarify the meaning of “tactics,” “operations,” and “strategy,” and discuss the central elements of space, time, and forces inherent in military operations. The other six chapters survey in detail the nature of operational thought in the German army from the late nineteenth century to the establishment of the NATO alliance. The author draws on a range of pertinent primary documents in German military archives, including wartime diaries, official memoranda, and General Staff officers’ unpublished personal papers.

Gross argues that modern German operational doctrine did not fundamentally change till after 1945 and that it reflected particular geographic, economic, and political circumstances: Germany’s central position in Europe, its desire for Great Power status, and its lack of the human and material resources needed to achieve it. Relying on a well-trained army, a sophisticated command-and-control system, and a robust railway network, the General Staff believed a series of rapid, well-timed offensives could inflict a decisively crippling blow on a larger, more powerful enemy military before it could bring its superior resources to bear. The opposing army would be not merely defeated, but “annihilated” in a vast encirclement battle. The need for very precise timing was, Gross writes, the “Sword of Damocles” hanging over this German operational concept. For, if the enemy’s military capacity was not destroyed completely, its surviving forces would regroup and drag Germany into a war of attrition it could never win.

This understanding of German strategic policy is not new.<sup>2</sup> Citino<sup>3</sup> (cited by Gross) has argued that mobile, concentric operations had been central to Prussian war-making as far back as the seventeenth century. But Gross sees the problem of fighting two enemies at once not as a geographic but a political

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1. A senior historian at the Center for Military History and Social Sciences of the Armed Forces in Potsdam, Gross has written extensively on World War I.

2. See, e.g., Wilhelm Deist, “Strategy and Unlimited Warfare in Germany: Moltke, Falkenhayn, and Ludendorff,” in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, eds., *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006) 265–79; Antulio J. Echevarria, *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2000); Williamson Murray, *German Military Effectiveness* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Nautical and Aviation Pub., 1992); and Jehuda L. Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr, 1986).

3. In *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years’ War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005).

one. Unlike Citino, he sees the period after 1871 as the decisive moment in German operational thinking, as military planning became intertwined with the Reich's Great Power ambitions. Otto von Bismarck had prevented war between the major European powers through shrewd alliances, but, by 1888 at the latest, Kaiser Wilhelm II's determination to find Germany a "place in the sun" isolated the Reich politically and left it facing a coalition of adversaries with superior resources. This "strategic dilemma" was reflected in German operational doctrine. The General Staff had to anticipate the possibility of a two-front war, if they intended to achieve continental hegemony militarily despite an insufficient economic and political power base.

In chapter 5, Gross explores how German operational theory was put into action. He cogently explains that Germany's defeats in 1918 and 1945 were not purely the result of Allied advantages in manpower and material or Adolf Hitler's strategic blunders, as many Wehrmacht generals later claimed. The German army certainly scored remarkable operational victories in the First World War I, showing an impressive capacity for innovation in defensive and offensive tactics. But the war ultimately exposed the inherent weaknesses in the German system. Both the Schlieffen Plan and Gen. Erich Ludendorff's Spring Offensives in 1918 were predicated on speed, and the Imperial German army simply lacked the necessary highly mobile units. In 1914, the non-motorized infantry and horse-drawn artillery could not destroy the French army in the encirclement battle envisioned in the Schlieffen Plan; nor, four years later, could they transform a decisive tactical victory into an operational one after breaking through the British lines. When it became clear that the Schlieffen Plan had failed, there was no fallback provision for a protracted war against the Allies. The waste of precious troops and materials in a series of stopgap operational "Lost Victories" (as Gross puts it) had catastrophic consequences.

Gross dispels the mystique of German military genius by showing that operational thinking in Germany did not fully reflect the lessons of the Great War. True, German officers recognized the importance of tanks and close air support, tactically speaking. But there was little innovation in operational or strategic doctrine. Gross cites official orders and unpublished writings by commanders like Hans von Seeckt, Edwin von Stülpnagel, and Wilhelm Groener to demonstrate their misguided conviction that operational superiority could offset Germany's deficits in manpower and resources. They underestimated the critical importance of strategy, logistics, and industrial productivity, as well as the value of integrating military planning with German foreign policy. Despite the tactical innovations that foreshadowed "Blitzkrieg," the Germans' basic approach to warfighting remained little more than a "radicalization of Schlieffen's classic operational concept" (185). Hence, the German army in 1939 was at best "a resurgence of the Kaiser's Army, augmented by military technology and organizational innovation. The key difference was that the military equipment necessary for rapid, mobile warfare so sorely lacking in World War I was now available in the form of the tank, aircraft, and motorization in general" (186). The Wehrmacht's early operational successes were deceiving; in the end, this German way of war was overwhelmed by the Allies' philosophy of "battle management," which relied on mass formations and superior firepower, planning, and logistics.

The author convincingly argues that the German army's stress on fighting "short wars" and neglect of logistics led to the deliberate starvation of millions of Soviet civilians and POWs in order to feed, clothe, and support Wehrmacht soldiers on the Eastern Front. In short, the German high command showed a "willingness to conduct its military operations through criminal means" (253).

The German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 launched a "war of annihilation," meant to eradicate the USSR and, with it, Eastern European Jewry. Gross cautions against confusing "annihilation" as an operational concept with Germany's actual conduct of war on the Eastern Front.<sup>4</sup> "Anni-

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4. Or its genocidal campaign against the Herero in 1904.

hilation” in the military sense is understood not as physical extermination, but as the elimination of the enemy’s army as an instrument for the prosecution of war” (256–47). Gross rightly emphasizes that “military necessity” dictated German thinking about war.<sup>5</sup> That is, there was no “special path” (*Sonderweg*) from Schlieffen to Hitler. But he fails to question the supposed separation of responsibilities between the Wehrmacht and the SS during the eastern campaign, according to which the former carried out the actual battlefield fighting, while Heinrich Himmler’s death squads (*Einsatzgruppen*) murdered some 1.5 million Jews. Nor does he discuss the Third Reich’s systematic scorched-earth strategy in the Soviet Union during the Wehrmacht’s retreat from the Eastern Front. One wishes for a more discerning treatment of National Socialist ideology as a driver of German military operations in World War II and of the radicalization of violence in its final years.

The Wehrmacht’s defeat in 1945 did not end this German “way of war.” It survived, Gross argues in his final chapter, in the new Bundeswehr, thanks to Gen. Adolf Heusinger, the former chief of the Operations Section in the Wehrmacht High Command. To be sure, West Germany’s entry into NATO ended the threat of a two-front war, that cornerstone of German operational thinking. Yet, history notwithstanding, many Bundeswehr officers believed in the superiority of German tactical-operational doctrine and advocated a mobile, armored defense of Europe to counter the numerically superior Soviet forces.

Minor criticisms aside, Gerhard Gross has confirmed his reputation as a most perceptive practitioner of operational military history. Although *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare* will appeal mostly to specialists in its subject, it should be required reading for anyone who wishes to better understand the German way of war in the twentieth century.

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5. On military necessity in German army operations, see further Jeff Rutherford, *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German Infantry’s War, 1941–1945* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014), and Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2005).