



Enduring the Whirlwind: The German Army in the Russo-German War 1941–1943 by Gregory Liedtke.

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The standard history of Germany's defeat on the Eastern Front during the Second World War depicts a Wehrmacht greatly outnumbered and overwhelmed by Red Army troops. As the initial German successes of 1941 fell short of conclusive victory, Gen. Franz Halder claimed the Russian advantage in numbers would be "balanced out through the high value of the German soldier."¹ This, of course, failed to happen, and German commanders like Erich von Manstein, Hans Heinz Guderian, and Hans von Luck later wrote in their memoirs that, in fact, sheer numerical inferiority (and poor decisions by Adolf Hitler²) doomed the Wehrmacht in the East.³

In *Enduring the Whirlwind*, historian Gregory Liedtke (Wilfrid Laurier Univ.) challenges the long-held belief that the Third Reich's defeat was inevitable as early as 1943, owing to shortfalls in men and matériel. With impressive analytical rigor and careful attention to relevant primary and secondary sources, he reopens the key question whether "Germany [was] able to provide reinforcements and replacements needed to maintain the strength of the Ostheer" (315). Indeed, he shows, by the eve of the Battle of Kursk, after over two years of combat and its crushing defeat at Stalingrad, the still formidable Wehrmacht had regenerated itself *three times* (319).

The book comprises an introduction, six chapters, a conclusion, fourteen appendices, a glossary, and a table of military ranks. The introduction sketches the historiographical background, including "the notion that the military forces of Germany were not really defeated by the Soviet Red Army on the battlefield at all, at least not in terms of operational or tactical level proficiency" (xxi).

Chapter 1 follows the Reichswehr (later, Wehrmacht) from 1919 through the fall of France in 1940. Chapter 2 analyzes developments from June 1940 to June 1941. Chapter 3 describes Germany's initial successes from June to October 1941 and chapter 4 recounts the failure of Barbarossa and efforts to rebuild the Wehrmacht before summer 1942. Chapter 5 follows the Wehrmacht farther east to the gates of Stalingrad, the Caucasus mountains, and the Crimea (Operation Blue). Chapter 6 concerns the 6th Army's collapse at Stalingrad and regrouping before the Battle of Kursk. Throughout, detailed tables showing losses, production figures, army organization, and equipment models bring home the scale of manpower and equipment commitments.

Liedtke's precise statistical analyses of the Wehrmacht's combat effectiveness clarify the differences in German terms for unit strengths, losses, and equipment serviceability. Only by grasp-

1. Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2000) 181.

2. Megargee argues that the deeply flawed German command system, not Hitler's incompetent military decisions, caused the Reich's defeat.

3. This verdict is echoed in western sources like the US Army's Foreign Military Studies manuscripts of the 1940s and 1950s. By 1945, German generals were (in the western press) blaming numerical deficiencies for their defeat—see Karl Thoholte, "A German Reflects upon Artillery," *Field Artillery Journal* 35.12 (1945) 709–15.

ing exactly how the Germans understood and recorded their numbers, he argues, can we accurately assess their combat power at any given time. Various misinterpretations of manpower reports, he notes, have obscured the extent of the Germans' ability to generate and project fighting forces throughout their campaigns (xxxviii–xliii).

The author begins by explaining how the Germans rebuilt their military and industrial base between their defeat in 1918 and the opening of World War II in 1939. He cautions us that

despite the dramatic images of screaming Stuka dive-bombers and swirling columns of apparently invincible panzers that seem to dominate the accepted narrative, ... it is vital to remember that Germany's military machine had modest roots and that its pre-war rearmament was driven and sometimes constrained by a host of competing and occasionally contradictory factors, individuals, and organizations.... Most sources concur that in September 1939 the German Army faced major shortages of arms and equipment.... Despite the universal acceptance of this notion, no comprehensive statistical evaluation of the German Army's material status upon the outbreak of war has ever been produced. (45, 64).

Liedtke extrapolates numbers from extant records to show how and how far the Germans were able to replace their losses of manpower and matériel during the initial phase of the war. Such supposed shortages did not prevent German successes in Poland, France, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries.

The operational pause after the fall of the Western democracies allowed the German military to rearm and rebuild. It did nothing, however, to make good fundamental weaknesses in the German campaigning model. Victory in the East required that

the Red Army ... be quickly destroyed in a series of encirclement battles, preferably as close to the frontier as possible to mitigate the effects of time and space on German logistics. The invasion ... [hinged] upon speed and the assumption that it was possible to annihilate Soviet military capabilities within a few months, if not weeks.⁴ (91)

When rapid victory failed to materialize by winter 1941–42 despite successful encirclement battles, the Wehrmacht was forced to tap the Reich's reserves of men and equipment. When large-scale actions recommenced in June, “overall losses during operations against the Soviet Union had climbed to 1,202,481 combat casualties and 715,400 sick, for a total of 2,018,881 men” (170). By all rights, the Wehrmacht should have been finished by June 1942. Liedtke, however, paints a different picture. Overall, “between October 1941 and June 1942, a total of 44 divisions (including three new panzer divisions), parts of two others, and a number of smaller ancillary units had been shipped east” (175), supplemented by an additional forty-four allied divisions. Indeed, in spring 1942, Germany was able to create seventeen new divisions.

Similarly, German industry, though operating on razor-thin margins and suffering from labor and raw material shortages, continued to supply the Wehrmacht at a remarkable rate. “In most instances, new production not only replaced the equipment lost to that point, but also permitted existing stocks to be increased by a considerable degree” (185). There were prodigious increases in small arms, crew-served weapons, and heavy equipment. Even the oft-maligned German motor transport situation was better than it has been portrayed. Between Operations Barbarossa and

4. See, further, Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2005). On the operational level, see Gerhard Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke to Heusinger* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2016). On the model's shortcomings, see Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2007).

Blue, German industry produced over 125,000 new vehicles and the German Army's motor vehicle strength grew by almost 30 percent between January and July 1942 despite the losses sustained in the East. These facts debunk the myth of an always undermanned and underequipped Wehrmacht.

Liedtke's statistics and thorough research in pertinent sources firmly buttress his evaluations of the German military's performance in the Soviet Union. His learning is helpfully on display in his many footnotes and twenty-six-page bibliography. But the book's conclusions are not always airtight. First, a thesis so reliant on sheer numbers risks overemphasizing the effects of attrition. This peril is addressed in the author's treatment of individual operations but not explicitly in his introduction or conclusion. That said, the German campaign model's stress on maneuver has been well documented elsewhere, so Liedtke's failure to discuss the topic here does not detract from the value of the book or its stated goals. Secondly, restoring troops does not necessarily equate to restoring effectiveness. The Germans' casualties early in the war sapped them of experienced professional soldiers and staff officers essential to competent planning, logistics, and combat leadership. Replacing veteran personnel is far trickier than replacing one tank model with an improved version.

Enduring the Whirlwind provides welcome new insights into strategy and tactics, while also addressing the misguided "perception of numerical-weakness [sic] in terms of Germany's ability to replace its losses and regenerate its military strength" (xxii). Gregory Liedtke's discerning assessment of German manpower and equipment deployed during the Ostkrieg reveals a more resilient and robust Wehrmacht than received opinion would have it. In so well-plowed a field of scholarship, this is no small achievement.