

# Politics in Battle: The Army and the State in the German-Soviet War

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# Introduction

The German-Soviet War lasted from 1941-1945 and constituted the largest and most total war yet waged.<sup>1</sup> On one side stood the Stalinist Soviet State and its vast Red Army and on the other, the Nazi State and the Wehrmacht. Both sides recognized that the existential nature of the war necessitated unity of purpose and action on the parts of political authority and military high command. However, achieving this unity was by no means uncomplicated. The division of political and military responsibility was a product of both the political structure of the states and the institutional culture of the state and military. The authoritarian structure of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union led to strong political influence on the conduct of operations and a lack of formal division of responsibility between state organs.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while neither state tolerated internal political dissent, both the ideological dimension of the war as well as the conflict between the institutions within these states represented a driving force in the conduct of operations and the strategic vision that contextualized them.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more general discussion of the German-Soviet War, see Herst Boog, Karl-Heinz Frieser, Rolf-Dieter Müller, et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* [Germany and the Second World War], vol. IV, VIII as well as David M. Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*.

<sup>2</sup> For a description of the polyocratic function of Nazi Germany, see Ian Kershaw Ian Kershaw, “‘Working Towards the Führer.’ Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship,” *Contemporary European History* 2, no. 2 (1993): 103–18.

This work will seek to analyze the interrelation of politics and operations in the case of the German-Soviet War. This analysis will be conducted through an investigation of the operational art, civil-military relations, and ideology of the belligerents. Rather than focus on solely the operational or the ideological causes for victory and defeat in the war as other works in the historiography have done, this work seeks to examine the impact of each factor on the other. The framework for this analysis will be based in the theory of war of German theorist and soldier Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). The choice of this theory as a method of analysis is on the basis of Clausewitz's engagement with the political dimension of war and the central position of Clausewitz's work in both German and Soviet understandings of war, politics, and operations. Clausewitz was elevated to mythic status in German tradition through Helmuth von Moltke the Elder (1800-1899), the military genius of German unification, and he attained similar status in Soviet tradition through Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924) incorporation of his theories into Bolshevik thought. Clausewitz's conception of the trinity of war as expressed in *On War*, consisting of reason, chance, and passion, corresponding to the state, the army, and the people respectively, is challenged by the realization of total war that was exhibited on the Eastern Front. The advent of totalitarian ideology and the use of propaganda created an environment that aligned the state with passion rather than reason as Clausewitz had seen it. Politics, rather than restraining war from its philosophical ideal, instead propelled it towards its most extreme form. The forces of power politics and *raison d'état* were replaced in German politics by an all-consuming ideology of racial death-struggle, where fanatical ideology demanded "a war more total and radical than anything that we can even yet imagine." This change affected war both practically and theoretically, as

fanatical political aims altered its conduct and fanatical regimes erased the divide between the civilian and the martial.

Further rationale for the use of a Clausewitzian lens is that both the Red Army and the German Army fully embraced Clausewitz and his definition of war as the continuation of politics with the addition of other means. Yet, what each organization understood this to mean was shaped both by the ideology and institutional culture from which they grew. The German Army understood this in such a fashion to draw a clear divide between the responsibility of the army and the political authority and on this basis resisted the intrusion of the German State into its operational planning. This power struggle ultimately resulted in the destruction of the independence of the German Army, becoming fully subsumed into the Nazi state. In contrast, the Red Army developed as a fundamentally Bolshevik institution and aligned itself with Lenin's embrace of Clausewitz's definition as a legitimization of political violence. At the end of the Russian Civil War, the Red Army, while entirely subordinate to Soviet political authority, was left to develop as an institution. However, the Red Army's officer corps was crushed as an institution by the Great Purge of 1938 leading to a nadir of military thinking.<sup>3</sup> Lackluster performances in conflicts during the interwar spurred reform and major reorganization. However, it was only with the outbreak of war in 1941 that the reconstruction of the institution of the Red Army began in desperate earnest. The existential threat that the Soviet Union faced necessitated a prioritizing of military competence, leading to a reordering of civil-military relations and the rebirth of the Red Army as an institution.

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<sup>3</sup> See David M. Glantz, "Attache Assessments of the Impact of the 1930s Purges on the Red Army," *The Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 2, no. 3 (September 1, 1989): 417–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518048908429955>.

The conduct of operations was influenced by the theoretical conceptions of the operational level of war. Newly defined in the interwar, the theory of operations was termed operational art, which consisted of the use of battles to attain a political object. The operational arts of the German Army and the Soviet Union thus developed in a political context, being influenced through institutional conflicts between political authority and the ideological purposes determined by the regimes. The extent to which each of the belligerents was capable of creating a working relationship between the institutions of the military and its political authority affected the conduct of operations and thus their ultimate outcome. Operational art, being an outgrowth of industrial war, represented an area of overlap between political and military authority, possessing both purely military and strategic-political implications.

In this manner, the forces of factional institutional conflict between the army and state, the normative political and military theories as to the relationship between the two, and the operational arts developed to achieve political ends. Politics impacted war through each of these interactions, shaping the manner in which military professionals viewed their relationship to the political goals sought as well as towards their command superiors. The approaches that were developed towards the integration of political processes and objectives into the operational command and planning profoundly affected the efficacy of these processes. Thus, the course of the German-Soviet war in this manner may be seen through the lens of the development of an understanding in both practical and theoretical terms of a relationship between the political and military elements of war that was to prove either beneficial or detrimental. The development of a positive theoretical understanding of the relationship between war and policy as well as

productive organization coordinational between political authority and the army were instrumental to Soviet victory, just as the failure to achieve this unity of effort was fatal to Germany.

## Background through the Interwar

The analysis of German and Soviet conceptions of the relation between war and politics will be divided into two sections. The first will focus on the relationship between military and civilian authority, both in the practical and the conceptual level, before addressing the theoretical conceptions held by the Germans and the Soviets with regard to the relationship between politics and the actual conduct of operations. An intellectual history of the theoretical frameworks that formed the foundation of German and Soviet understandings of these relations will be constructed, spanning from their foundations to the outbreak of war, allowing for a greater understanding of the origins and nature of the institutional and theoretical conflicts that characterized the organizations. Central to this discussion will be the acceptance or rejection of the principle of the primacy of policy as advocated by Clausewitz. The first section will address the cultural and intellectual basis for the discordance in the relationship between military and civilian authorities and in this manner will investigate the way in which internal politics affected the role of the army and its ability to conduct war as well as the ability of the state to utilize the army to achieve its policy goals. The army's own conception as to the manner in which policy goals were to be achieved is addressed in the second section, which focuses on the varied conceptions of operational art and the relations between operations and politics prescribed within. Through this framework, a comprehensive background for the

conflicts regarding the political dimension of war that occurred throughout the German-Soviet War can be contextualized and their continuity demonstrated.

## Civil-Military Relations through the Interwar

### Institutional Conflict - Pride and Insecurity

#### Introduction

The German Army (the *Heer*), and the Red Army (RKKA) existed not only as the name of organizations responsible for managing a band of armed men, but constituted institutions with memory, continuity, image, and a distinct culture that extended beyond the tenure of any particular individual and existed outside the wishes of policymakers, no matter how seemingly omnipotent.<sup>4</sup> In many respects, the RKKA and the German Army existed at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of institutional relations with the political authority. The German Army was the product of a storied and prestigious military tradition that predated the successive states it served. Filled with institutional pride, it possessed a strong self-conception of its nature, authority, and mission outside of the direction given to it by the political apparatus. In direct contrast, the Red Army emerged as a product of the Bolshevik party, eschewing continuity with the Tsarist military it had replaced and identifying entirely with the political authority and the ideology it represented.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, insecurity and resentment on the part of Stalin led

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<sup>4</sup> Jorit Wintjes, "German Army Culture, 1871–1945," in *The Culture of Military Organizations*, ed. Peter R. Mansoor and Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 100–120, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108622752.006>.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew M. Hurley, "A Worker's Way of War: The Red Army's Doctrinal Debate, 1918 - 1924," n.d., 123.

to the existence of the Red Army as an institution to be viewed as an existential threat, motivating the imposition of stifling political officers and a corresponding purge of those deemed disloyal, regardless of reality. In this manner, by 1941 neither the Soviet Red Army or the German Army had developed a positive and efficient working relationship with political authority.

## The German Army - Moltke to Halder

Helmuth von Moltke “the Elder,” first Chief of the Prussian General Staff (1857-1871) then of the German General Staff (1871-1891) was the most influential figure in defining the cultural relationship between the German Army and political authority. Even Scharnhorst, Gneisenau, and Blücher, the heroes of the Napoleonic Wars, could not boast of the dramatic and decisive successes that Moltke had won for not only Prussia but all of Germany. Following the First World War, Moltke the Elder still loomed large, having been able to accomplish what Schlieffen, Moltke the Younger (his nephew, Chief of the General Staff, 1906-1914), and Ludendorff and Hindenburg had only dreamt of doing by defeating France in a matter of weeks. Moltke, as the model Prussian Chief of the General Staff, was seen by the German Army as possessing the correct view as to the interaction between the civilian government and the waging of war. As Moltke wrote in *On Strategy*:

“Policy uses war for the attainment of its goals; it works decisively at the beginning and the end of war, so that indeed policy reserves for itself the right to increase its demands or to be satisfied with a lesser success. In this uncertainty, strategy must always direct its endeavors towards the highest aim attainable with available means.

Strategy thus works best for the goals of policy, but in its actions is fully independent of policy.”<sup>6</sup>

“Policy does this in such a manner in that it reserves to itself the right to increase its demands during the course of the war or to satisfy itself with minor successes. Given this uncertainty, strategy can direct its endeavors only towards the highest goal attainable with the means at hand... Policy must not be allowed to interfere with operations... What policy can do with his victories or defeats is not his business.”<sup>7</sup>

In this Moltke draws a clear dividing line between policy and operations. In his view, politics should under no circumstances impact the conduct of operations.<sup>8</sup> As a result of his foundational influence in German military history and culture, this view was propagated and carried forward as tradition. Moltke’s statements are entirely congruent with the traditional Prusso-German conception of the role of the army in society. The institutional culture of the Prussian military, specifically the Prussian officer corps, was that of independent professionals in service to the king exclusively. What is commonly considered *auftragstaktik* (mission tactics, also known as *mission command*) is a direct result of this relationship. While *auftragstaktik* allowed for greater flexibility and allowed for commanders to not be hampered in operations by lack of communications with the high command, this independence fostered a culture that was antithetical to the idea of subordination of the military to the political. The privileged place of the army within society further meant that there was a tremendous amount of pride inherent in the officer

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<sup>6</sup>Helmuth von Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel J. Hughes (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993,) 44.

<sup>7</sup>Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 36.

<sup>8</sup>Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Moltke and the German Military Tradition: His Theories and Legacies,” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 26, no. 1 (1996): 6.

corps.<sup>9</sup> Even in combat, the philosophy of *auftragstaktik* meant that the decision to obey or disobey an order was a matter of an officer's own professional opinion that was itself inflated in self-importance by his membership in the elite organization of the Prusso-German officer corps. This privilege is in stark contrast to the view of civilian officials in Prussian society, especially within the army itself. Not only was the civilian government viewed with skepticism by the aristocratic class that made up much of the officer corps, but it further lacked legitimacy among the monarchist and generally socially conservative population of 19th century Germany. This lack of prestige and legitimacy for the civilian government made the subordination of military desires—even those as vain as a victory parade—to political interest as expressed by the civilian government an incredibly difficult task as was demonstrated in the German wars of unification.<sup>10</sup>

Moltke's influence on the institution of the German Army and its culture not only through his writings but through his conduct, particularly his actions in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), which became the war *par excellence* in German military tradition. The Battle of Sedan was won about six weeks into the campaign, ending with Napoleon III in captivity, his army destroyed, and the Army of the Rhine under Bazaine surrounded in Metz with no hope of relief. However, Moltke and the army desired a more total victory and humiliation of the French and so sought to besiege Paris. Moltke argued that this was needed for military reasons. Bismarck desired a swift conclusion to the war but Moltke stalled, arguing that Bismarck ought not to have a role

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Citino, *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich, Modern War Studies* (University Press of Kansas, 2005), 244.

<sup>10</sup>See Dennis E. Showalter, "The Political Soldiers of Bismarck's Germany: Myths and Realities," *German Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (1994): 59–77, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1431304>.

in the conduct of the war. Moltke's conflict with Bismarck was not a debate about how the French should be defeated, something that could be argued to be a military matter, but on a matter of policy-how fully defeated the French needed to be. The decision to seek a more systematic reduction of the French capacity to resist was an assertion of Moltke's views on what the correct policy was cloaked in a technical military concern.<sup>11</sup> Moltke thus developed a precedent not only of conducting operations without regard to political aims but of superseding the wishes of the political authority in times of war.

While Wilhelm I ultimately intervened in Bismarck's favor, by that point Moltke and the army had begun the siege of Paris that they had desired. From that point, the chance to end the war without inciting the bitter enmity and revanchism that resulted was lost, and Bismarck felt forced to seek to cripple and isolate France. While Bismarck was able to accomplish the latter, the outcome of the Franco-Prussian War was more harmful to Germany's grand strategic situation than it needed to be. Rather than ending the war as soon as unification could be achieved, the war was dragged out in such a manner as to outrage the French population.<sup>12</sup> The humiliation that France suffered in the war meant that France was effectively permanently embittered towards Germany and would seek revenge as soon as possible. Germany bore the political consequences of Moltke's decision to besiege Paris, a decision he had no formal mandate or authority to make.

Crucially Bismarck's ability to restrain the army and create a favorable peace was not inherent in his position as chancellor but was based in his favor with Wilhelm I. Thus, upon the accession of Wilhelm II in 1888, Bismarck found himself with a less than

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<sup>11</sup> Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Stig Förster, "Facing 'People's War': Moltke the Elder and Germany's Military Options after 1871," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10, no. 2 (June 1, 1987): 209–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402398708437297>.

sympathetic Emperor, meaning that neither he nor his successors were able to assert the same control over the military and could therefore not end wars when it was deemed politically beneficial to do so. The constitutional weakness of the civilian government, both the appointed Chancellor and elected Reichstag, in Prussia and the succeeding *Kaiserreich* engrained the disdain of the military for it. The concept that Moltke the Elder created of the Prusso-German military as an apolitical entity can therefore best be understood as a theoretical justification to preserve the independence of the military from civilian control. This concept necessitated the unspoken practical rejection of Clausewitz's most famous axiom, that war was "a continuation of politics with other means." If war was a political act, the organ that carried it out was necessarily a political entity. This fact was ignored by Moltke, who instead drew a sharp division between war, in which the army was the sole authority, and peace, in which the army was silent.<sup>13</sup> This measure succeeded in placing the German military entirely outside of civilian control. Bismarck had only had influence through favor with the King, and succeeding Chancellors never had his level of influence, particularly not with Emperor Wilhelm II. This coup for the military that Moltke had achieved came at the cost, however, of removing strategy in the Clausewitzian sense (the use of battles to achieve a political objective) from the lexicon of the German Army.

The thinking of Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff from 1891-1906, was the logical result of a culture that denied the effect of the political on the conduct of operations. Schlieffen created a war plan<sup>14</sup> that made no allowances for

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<sup>13</sup>Günter Roth, "Field Marshal von Moltke the Elder His Importance Then and Now," *Army History*, no. 23 (1992): 1–10, 6.

<sup>14</sup>R. Foley, *Alfred Von Schlieffen's Military Writings*, Military History and Policy (Taylor & Francis, 2012), 163.

variations of the political situation and pursued what Moltke had advocated for: total victory irrespective of politics.<sup>15</sup> Schlieffen's focus on planning mobilizations and deployments at the outbreak of war has direct lineage to Moltke's own use of mobilizations in the German wars of unification. The Schlieffen Plan with precise timetables of troop movements represents an extension of this philosophy. While Moltke did not believe he could predict beyond initial contact with the main body of the enemy's force, Schlieffen sought to eliminate this uncertainty through meticulous planning. In this manner, any influence politics or politicians may have had was entirely excised from the sphere Schlieffen had carved out for the army.<sup>16</sup>

The plan Schlieffen had developed by 1905 was emblematic of the attitude of the German Army towards political questions and civilian leadership. The original plan called for an encirclement of Paris from the west, with a right wing wheeling all the way to the channel coast through the violation of both Belgian and Dutch neutrality and relying on formations that did not yet exist. The inclusion of hundreds of thousands of troops beyond those that actually existed was further deeply problematic and emblematic of the lack of intergovernmental coordination characteristic of the German General Staff. Despite the broad authority of the Chief of the General Staff, Schlieffen did not have the power to increase the size of the army to that which the 1905 plan called for. That power lay with the War Ministry and the Reichstag, which had no institutional link to General Staff except through the Kaiser.<sup>17</sup> The flighty Wilhelm II lacked the ability and inclination to coordinate the two bodies. As a result the two competed jealously for authority, with

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<sup>15</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (London, W.i.: Oswald Wolff, 1958), 134.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel J. Hughes and Richard L. Dinardo, *Imperial Germany and War, 1871-1918*, ed. Raymond Callahan et al. (University Press of Kansas, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvgd2cc>.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard P. Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke the Elder to Heusinger* (University Press of Kentucky, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1dgn6ny>, 78.

Schlieffen refusing to share his operational plans on the grounds of secrecy. In this manner, the Chief of the General Staff was able to take political decisions on his own, without interaction with political authority and develop plans that would only be known to the rest of the government when it became time to implement them and it was too late to make any other political decision than that which the Chief of the General Staff had prepared for. However, the General Staff equally was left without access to the political tools to adequately prepare for the execution of its plans. The War Ministry and the Reichstag had no understanding that Germany's only operational plan for war with France required the mobilization of additional forces and so could not conceive as to why Schlieffen had requested them. Illustrative of this tendency, it was not until 1912 that Schlieffen's successor, Moltke the Younger, deigned to share his war plans with the war minister.<sup>18</sup>

As Schlieffen's plan was the only war plan developed by the General Staff, in the event of war Schlieffen had effectively taken the decision to present the civilian government no political option other than to invade two neutral states, something that is undoubtedly a political question. While the military advantages or disadvantages of invading a state is a question for army leadership, the decision as to whether they justify the costs is a question for the statesman. This was not a view shared by Schlieffen or his fellow General Staff officers. The factionalism and institutional derision towards civilian administration that characterized the German military prevented the development of an effective working relationship through which political and military concerns could be synthesized. The Chief of the General Staff asked for no one's approval before drawing

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<sup>18</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 132.

up war plans that involved the violation of Belgian and Dutch neutrality, despite the clear political consequences that stood outside of the General Staff's judgment and authority.

As a consequence of this lack of coordination, the General Staff possessed neither the ability nor inclination to develop strategy overall.<sup>19</sup> The division within the military structure of Imperial Germany gave no specific remit for the creation of strategy to any one body. The Emperor was the only institutional link between not only the various army organs but each of them and all civilian apparatus of state. The German Army as an institution was responsible exclusively to the monarch and was in no way under the direction of the Chancellor, and as such developed a culture that viewed itself as simultaneously outside of and above politics. "Apolitical" for the German military meant outside the influence of the German political (civilian) establishment.<sup>20</sup> The Heer had no interest in subordinating itself to the "lesser" organs of the state and understood that declaring a sharp separation between military and political matters was a potent weapon in the factional power struggle. However, the denial of any political element to the conduct of operations was fundamentally a denial of the strategic level of war. Thus, the German Army, in order to gain an advantage in the factional power struggle, developed a culture in which the Chief of the General Staff used operations to pursue objectives as he saw fit, irrespective of their political worth, the political situation or the policy aims for which the war was fought.

What Moltke and his successors refused to acknowledge was the uncomfortable truth that in this capacity the German military acted as a political organization of its own.

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<sup>19</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 54. See also Wolfgang J. Mommsen, "Kaiser Wilhelm II and German Politics," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (1990): 289–316.

<sup>20</sup> Antulio J. Echevarria, "Borrowing from the Master: Uses of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the Great War," *War in History* 3, no. 3 (1996): 274–92, 288.

Moltke's theorem of avoiding political concerns by seeking total victory was itself an intensely political act. The means by which a war is waged is necessarily a political question, both in the Clausewitzian sense, as well as the fact that certain means are incongruous with certain political ends. In the case of the Franco-Prussian War, Moltke's decision to invest Paris had profound political consequences. Thus, the idea that the army was apolitical and therefore a parallel authority to the civilian government served the function of usurping the political power of the civilian government to determine the manner in which a war was waged, particularly the nature of the peace sought. The Chancellor, as head of the cabinet, and the Chief of the General Staff, as head of the army, were in parallel both servants of the Prussian king (and later German Emperor), serving at his pleasure. This arrangement was as much an artifact of Prussia's history and constitution as much as Moltke's own desire for institutional independence.<sup>21</sup> In the Prussian system the army answered only to the monarch. As a result, the ultimate decision as to whether to privilege the advice of the civilian government over the desires of the military lay with the monarch. Thus, rather than being apolitical, the German military was a parallel political authority that went so far as to make claims to supremacy in times of war.

Through the course of the First World War following the failure of the initial German offensive to destroy the French Army the consequences of this tool of factionalism became increasingly apparent as the General Staff took an increasingly dominant position. The totality of the First World War allowed the army to argue that it had practically unlimited responsibility. However, the internalized conception of the Heer as an apolitical entity prevented the General Staff from developing a strategy. Without

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<sup>21</sup> Citino, *The German Way of War*, 310.

admitting political considerations into the calculus, the General Staff could not-and did not-attempt to create a framework for connecting individual operations with obtaining an advantageous peace. In fact, from Schlieffen to Ludendorff, none of the German commanders created detailed plans or even seriously concerned themselves with the question of how the war was to be ended.<sup>22</sup> Schlieffen's plan retained its lack of policy considerations despite modification by his successor, Moltke the Younger (Chief of the General Staff, 1906-1914). The elder Moltke's principle of a military free from civilian control had by this point become dogma. The civilian government was not asked what it was hoping to gain through war and thus the war plan was not directed towards gaining a specific policy objective. This inherent lack of what Clausewitz termed "strategy" led to the development and execution of a war plan that dealt exclusively in means (tactical victories) but made no account for the ends (a favorable peace.) That the military controlled policy once war was declared, and the military had decided that its policy was to "apolitically" seek absolute victory, meant there was no ability to seek a political settlement to the war. As Wilhelm II privileged the military's view of their own authority, the military had the right to not only determine the conduct of the war and its objectives but also the terms on which it would end.<sup>23</sup> While Erich von Falkenhayn during his brief tenure as Chief of the General Staff advocated for a negotiated peace, his isolation within the General Staff and lack of connections in the Imperial Court meant that his recommendation was essentially ignored and he was soon replaced by more traditionally minded commanders. Not only was Falkenhayn personally not in a politically

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<sup>22</sup> Gross, *The Myth and the Reality of German Warfare*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> Gross, *The Myth and the Reality of German Warfare*, 97.

advantageous position, but he faced a struggle against the institutional culture that had deliberately eschewed the question of strategy.<sup>24</sup>

The Hindenburg-Ludendorff diarchy that came to administer Germany during the latter years of the First World War represents the culmination of the conflict between the Heer and the civilian government. The Heer had triumphed, to the point that even the Emperor was dependent on Hindenburg and Ludendorff and the civilian government was practically irrelevant.<sup>25</sup> The apex of this was in the rejection of the Reichstag Peace Resolution.<sup>26</sup> On July 19, 1917, the German legislature passed the resolution, which committed to a peace that rejected territorial acquisitions. This act was opposed by both the army's high command and the Chancellor (neither elected, and both answerable exclusively to the Emperor). When the Reichstag nevertheless passed the resolution, it was simply ignored by Hindenburg and Ludendorff. The army, rather than act in accordance with the policy of the civilian government and pursue the compromise peace it desired, dogmatically followed Moltke's philosophy of seeking absolute victory regardless of the opinions of "politicians". In this manner, the rejection of the principle of the primacy of policy that had begun with Moltke ultimately led the German Army to act in a manner counter to German interests as they were defined by the Reichstag. If German war aims were defined by the Reichstag's resolution, the means the army sought to accomplish them (total victory) were entirely incongruous with the ends. With the total divorce of military means from political ends, the Germany army had abandoned strategy.

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<sup>24</sup> For more on Falkenhayn and his attempt to make strategy, see Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken Und Handeln Im Kaiserreich* [Falkenhayn: Political Thought and Action in Imperial Germany], Beiträge Zur Militärgeschichte, Bd. 42 (München: Oldenbourg, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> Martin Kitchen, *The Silent Dictatorship: The Politics of the German High Command under Hindenburg and Ludendorff, 1916-1918* (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Rudolf Huber, "The Reichstag's Peace Resolution (July 19, 1917)," trans. Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering, German History in Documents and Images, 1961, [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=987](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=987).

Or, in another sense, this episode reveals the Heer as utilizing the claim of being apolitical to advance the political goals of the military, which desired absolute victory and found a compromise peace unpalatable for political reasons. The Heer by this point outright defined its own political objectives as absolute victory and denied the authority of the Reichstag to set the objectives for the war.

Despite the ultimate calamitous failure of the army to bring Germany into anything other than a state of capitulation, the institutional reputation of the body escaped intact. Hindenburg and Ludendorff resigned rather than admit defeat and immediately began propagating the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the stab-in-the-back myth, that blamed internal political elements for the ultimate defeat of the army. This narrative was broadly attractive to German society; the war had been carried out on foreign soil, with a censored press limiting knowledge of military reverses and making victory seem within reach even in 1918. As such, while the newborn Weimar Republic was marred in the public consciousness by the original sin of the Versailles Treaty, the *Reichswehr* that succeeded the Imperial Army bore practically no stigma. Instead, the army maintained its privileged position, escaping the responsibility for the tremendous defeat it had been the architect of.

Initially, however, the relationship between the Reichswehr and the new republic was promising.<sup>27</sup> The Ebert-Groener pact, by which Wilhelm Groener (1867-1939), de facto commander-in-chief of the Imperial German Army upon Ludendorff's resignation in 1918, agreed to support Friedrich Ebert's social democratic party's government established not only toleration but cooperation between the army and the new democracy.

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<sup>27</sup> William Mulligan, "Civil-Military Relations in the Early Weimar Republic," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (2002): 819–41.

However, this support came with a crucial caveat. While Groener provided Ebert's parliamentary regime with the backing of the military against internal threats such as the Spartacist uprising and temporary insurance against attacks from the right, the most significant condition Groener attached to his support was the preservation of the place of the officer corps and the corresponding institutional independence of the military. Groener was perhaps the most loyal to the Weimar Republic of the leaders of the Reichswehr but his retirement as soon as the Treaty of Versailles had been signed and domestic order restored limited his influence on its institutional culture. His attempts to subordinate the Reichswehr to the Weimar government were met with resistance and his tenure as Minister of Defense (1928-1932) was ultimately too late to foster any attachment between the army and the republic.

Groener's successor as chief of the Reichswehr, Hans von Seeckt (1866-1936), sought to reconstitute the identity of the German military in the face of a treaty aimed at its destruction. The *Großer Generalstab* (General Staff) was dissolved and banned by the Treaty of Versailles, with the Entente having seen the institution as a source of militarism in German policy. However, while the organization in name was dismantled, its parts were preserved and placed under the jurisdiction of other departments of the Weimar Republic. The *Truppenamt* (Troop Office) while officially a personnel organization, nevertheless served as the direct successor to the General Staff, with Seeckt as Chief of the *Truppenamt* fulfilling the function of Chief of the General Staff. The *Truppenamt* was responsible for operational planning as well as the training of the Reichswehr. In this manner, Seeckt was able to exert considerable influence over the development of the institutional culture of the Reichswehr and of its officer corps.

While Seeckt was personally close with Groener, he had a far more conservative outlook politically, possessing a dim view of the republic. While Groener as a politician sought to better integrate the German military into civilian society, his role in advising the civilian government to accept the Versailles treaty as well as his acceptance of the blame to shield nominal commander-in-chief Paul von Hindenburg weakened his credibility among the leadership of the Reichswehr. Seeckt in particular was hostile to the Weimar government and viewed it primarily as a necessary evil until Germany could regain its strength. As such, he sought to insulate the Reichswehr from the policies of the civilian government. The fragile nature of the Weimar Republic and the strength of the military as an institution meant that its separatism and in some cases outright disobedience went unaddressed.<sup>28</sup> The Kapp Putsch in 1920 presented the first test of the civil-military relationship outlined in the Weimar Constitution under Seeckt. Conservative elements within the military and civilian government were aggrieved by the formation of a republic and its perceived capitulation to Entente demands in the Versailles Treaty and sought to depose the Ebert regime. The putsch was sparked by the Ebert government's attempt to demobilize the *Freikorps*, right-wing paramilitaries that had supported the nascent republic against the Spartacist Uprising. When these units refused to demobilize, conservative elements utilized the opportunity to attempt to depose the left wing government. When the Reichswehr was ordered to put down the coup attempt, Seeckt refused, instead remaining neutral. Seeckt claimed that ordering soldiers to fire on their comrades would have been impossible and resulted in a total loss of

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<sup>28</sup> Robert M. Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-39*, Stackpole Military History Series (Stackpole Books, 2007), 169.

confidence and cohesion in the German military.<sup>29</sup> However, his refusal to intervene deprived the Ebert regime of its only armed force available. While Ebert and his government were nonetheless able to subdue the putsch via a general strike, the response of the Reichswehr to the attempt demonstrated that Groener's promise for the support of the military for the Republic was not extended by Seeckt, at least not against a cause sympathetic to the officer corps.

Seeckt's disobedience, as well as that of his fellow officers that followed his lead, was a crucial element in defining the relationship between the Reichswehr and the Weimar government. The Weimar Constitution unequivocally named the President as head of the military, replacing the Emperor in that respect. That the officer corps felt no need to comply with direct orders of the commander-in-chief established that the office of president, while legally the point of union between the civilian and military regimes, was not afforded the respect and loyalty that the Emperor had enjoyed. The favorable neutrality shown towards the putschers by the army and the insubordination shown the republic went unaddressed as a consequence. In this manner, more so than any period except the Ludendorff-Hindenburg Diarchy of 1916-1918, the German Army acted as a state within a state.<sup>30</sup> Its own institutional strength and political legitimacy was understood to be greater than that of the civilian government and as such, no government possessed a mandate sufficient to effectually curtail its independence until the Nazi seizure of power. As such, the Reichswehr maintained if not intensified the organizational division of politics from war as a means of legitimizing the independence of the military

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Salewski, "Preußischer Militarismus — Realität Oder Mythos? Gedanken Zu Einem Phantom [Prussian Militarism — Myth or Reality? Reflections on a Phantom]," *Zeitschrift Für Religions-Und Geistesgeschichte* 53, no. 1 (2001): 19–34.

<sup>30</sup> Emre Sencer, "Fear and Loathing in Berlin: German Military Culture at the Turn of the 1930s," *German Studies Review* 37, no. 1 (2014): 19–39.

not just from politics, but from civilian authority. The aforementioned myth of the apolitical military within Imperial Germany endured and was for this purpose reinforced by Seeckt.<sup>31</sup> However, the abolition of the monarchy and reorganization of Germany under the Weimar constitution presented a challenge to the theory behind this independence. No longer was the military legally entirely outside the authority of civilian government. However, despite the fact that the president of the republic was also commander-in-chief of the Reichswehr, the Reichswehr chose to call the bluff of the Weimar Republic during the Kapp Putsch by refusing to follow orders from the President. The lack of reprisal following the failure of the Putsch indicated to military leadership that the civilian government lacked a mandate to threaten the independence of the military.

The Reichswehr was therefore almost from its inception secure in its status as a state within a state outside the politics of the Republic. However, while it was outside the republic and Seeckt prominently declared the organization to be apolitical, it nonetheless viewed itself in a fundamentally militarist and highly conservative manner. The Reichswehr considered its mission as the preservation of the German military under Versailles and the preparation for its inevitable expansion once Germany escaped its treaty limitations. Even as the Reichswehr drafted war plans that acknowledged its inability to defend Germany's frontiers, it continued to plan for Germany's resurgence as a great power. The officer corps generally viewed the Weimar Republic as fundamentally illegitimate, something imposed on Germany as a result of its loss in the war. This fact only reinforced the institutional refusal to integrate the pursuit of political objectives (specifically those of the civilian government) into the conduct of operations, on the basis

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<sup>31</sup> Citino, *Path to Blitzkrieg*, 145.

that the army should remain apolitical. But this was nonetheless a political stance and one that continued even through the Nazi seizure of power until active measures by that government sought to curtail this political independence.

The Ebert regime and succeeding civilian governments viewed Bolshevism as a greater threat than the army and accordingly did not place a premium on ending the independence of the military. President of the Russian Provisional Government Alexander Kerensky had feared repeating the mistakes of the French Revolution and thus guarded against a Bonapartist-military coup that never appeared. In so doing, he empowered the Bolsheviks, who ultimately toppled his regime in a coup from the left. The fate of Russian democrats loomed large in the mind of German democrats and as such the threat of Bolshevism was prioritized, with the military left to manage its own affairs. The decision by German democrats not to challenge the institutional independence of the German military served its purpose of both preventing the Reichswehr from openly rebelling against the Weimar government and seeking to install a military government while simultaneously providing a tool against left-wing attempts to overthrow the Republic. While the military ultimately did not resist the Nazi seizure of power or attempt to preserve the republic, by the time Hitler was Chancellor the Weimar Republic had ushered itself into a grave.<sup>32</sup> An army more loyal to the republic may perhaps have been able to save it, but the army did not play any direct role in its demise. The Reichswehr, secure in its independence and looking down on the civilian government with disdain, deliberately remained removed from the Nazi seizure of power.

The Nazi regime was greeted with cautious optimism from the Reichswehr. The militarism of the Nazis combined with the weakness of preceding Weimar governments

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936*:(W.W. Norton, 1999), 379.

led to a hope that the status quo of civil-military relations would be maintained but with greater support for rearmament. The radicalism of the Nazis caused consternation among the army elite of more traditional conservatives, particularly the calls of Ernst Röhm and the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) for a revolution that would overturn the old order. The SA, not under Hitler's direct control, was a bastion of anti-capitalist and anti-traditionalist views and had become a liability to the Chancellor. Röhm was not cowed by Hitler's personality cult and the street violence and anti-establishment rhetoric risked alienating the traditional conservatives whom Hitler needed to secure his power. The result of this common opposition to the SA was an agreement between Hitler and the leadership of the Reichswehr, where the Reichswehr would support the Nazi regime in exchange for curbing the SA, something that would come about through the subsequent Night of the Long Knives and included the assassination of Röhm.<sup>33 34</sup> While the terms were different from the Ebert-Groener pact, it nonetheless re-established the traditional contractual conception of the German officer corps to the political authority that originated in the relationship between the monarchy and the *Junkers*. While the Hitler dictatorship presented the army with a civilian government it could not ignore, the institutional culture of acting independently from civilian control endured. Hitler, in the eyes of the officer corps, could fulfill the role that the Emperor once had. Even if it was answerable to Hitler, the army believed its more general independence could be maintained as it remained outside the authority of any other civilian authority. The German Army, as a result, could view itself as an institution in parallel to the political authority, bound to it by an arrangement made by mutual consent, rather than a mere subordinate apparatus of

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<sup>33</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, 516.

<sup>34</sup> Eleanor Hancock, "The Purge of the SA Reconsidered: 'An Old Putschist Trick'?" *Central European History* 44, no. 4 (2011): 669–83.

the state. There was a naive hope that the professed militarism and conservatism of the Nazis would preserve the privileged status the army considered its right.<sup>35</sup> This belief was erroneous.

Hitler, as was his style, was not acting in good faith. While the army was currently a useful ally, he would not be satisfied until the institution was brought into ideological alignment. However, the fact that the Nazi government had come to power through an arrangement with the military meant that it struggled to “Nazify” the institution with the simplicity and totality it had been able to apply to other elements of society.<sup>36</sup> While the Reichswehr supported the Nazi agenda, it resisted nazification, both out of institutional pride and through the personal political leanings of officers which were protected by the independence and prestige of the institution. The Reichswehr sought to participate and collaborate while maintaining its traditions and traditional independence.<sup>37</sup> There was an unspoken struggle on the part of the Reichswehr to recreate the relationship the German military had traditionally enjoyed with the monarch. Ultimately, Hitler was able to force the military to accept political direction through a willingness to use violence and even chicanery to achieve such a result. This decisive, violent, and underhanded action was outside the bounds of the means that Weimar regimes were willing or able to utilize. The Night of the Long Knives removed not only the SA, but key members or former members of the armed forces that were viewed as presenting the threat of a counter-coup against the Nazi regime.

While Hitler sought to Nazify the army in earnest, he was nevertheless unable to do so quickly or easily. The Nazis, having come to power through semi-democratic

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<sup>35</sup> Citino, *The German Way of War*, 270.

<sup>36</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, 521.

<sup>37</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 178.

means and reliant on the backing of many traditional conservatives lacked the time and power to radically reshape German society to the extent that would have been necessary to reconstruct the powerful institution of the army in the Nazi mold. Beyond the question of conservative allies, Nazi ideology itself strongly venerated the institution of the German military and its traditions. While Hindenburg (and ultimately Ludendorff) personally looked down on Hitler and the Nazis, the Nazis did their utmost to associate Nazism with the prestigious institution of the military as a means of legitimizing themselves and grounding themselves in German conservatism. The spectacle of Hindenburg's funeral, despite his request to be interred in a family plot with his wife, was too good of a propaganda opportunity for the Nazis to forgo.<sup>38</sup> In this manner, the conservative aspect of Nazi ideology that was embraced through the purging of more revolutionary elements in the Night of the Long Knives limited the ability of the Nazis to directly reshape existing institutions such as the military in exchange broader support from the army and mainstream conservatives.

The conflict between Hitler and the army remained subdued until late 1937. Detailed in the Hossbach Memorandum, army leadership was made aware of Hitler's plans for imminent war.<sup>39</sup> While Hitler did not yet call for war against the Western Powers in the immediate future, he called for the swift annihilation and annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia. Much of the army high command including Supreme Commander of the Army Werner von Fritsch as well as Chief of the renamed-General Staff Ludwig Beck viewed these aggressive intentions as dangerously premature.<sup>40</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*, 526.

<sup>39</sup> "The Avalon Project : Hossbach Memorandum," accessed April 18, 2021, <https://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/hossbach.asp>.

<sup>40</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 177.

intentions expressed in the Hossbach Memorandum were viewed as objectives that would lead directly to a general European war that Germany could not hope to win. In an expression of confidence in the strength of the institutional power of the German Army even in the highly Nazified state that existed in 1938, Beck, Fritsch, and the Blomberg, the war minister, openly opposed Hitler's expansionist agenda on the grounds that it would provoke Anglo-French intervention thus further rearmament was required before a confrontation was tenable.

Rather than strike a direct blow at the military, Hitler used more insidious and subtle forms of erosion in order to bring the institution to heel. A scandal regarding Blomberg's marriage to a woman with a scandalous past to the conservative officer corps allowed Hitler to force the resignation of the Hindenburg-appointed minister. The Blomberg affair inspired the manufacturing of a similar incident to dispose of Fritsch, allowing Hitler to replace the war ministry with the new *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), the high command of the armed forces, which placed the *Oberkommando des Heeres* (OKH) under its authority, along with the navy and air force. In this manner, Hitler reduced the status of the army from the premier branch, with war planning being done by the general staff at OKH, to one of several branches with overall planning authority invested in OKW. To head the new body Hitler appointed Wilhelm Keitel, a spineless devotee to Hitler and all too willing to be a tool of the Nazi cause. The creation of OKW provided Hitler with his own institution through which to erode the mandate of the army and create a pro-Nazi organ within the military establishment to accomplish this. The creation of a redundant agency, a trademark of Hitler's, fostered factional conflicts that he could encourage and increased his power as the arbitrator of such

disputes. He further replaced Fritsch with Walther von Brauchitsch as commander-in-chief, a man personally loyal to Hitler and utterly unwilling to take a stand against his expansionist agenda. In this manner, Hitler skillfully exploited the existing factionalism within the army as well as exacerbated it through the creation of OKW to increase OKH's reliance on his favor.<sup>41</sup> Beck attempted a campaign of mass resignation from the army to dissuade Hitler from his war-policy, but eventually resigned alone. Hitler's first underhanded-blow against the army was complete. OKH was removed from its exalted position and made subordinate to a Hitlerite toadie and the OKW, a body that could be made in the Nazi image. Beck's replacement as Chief of the General Staff, Franz Halder, was personally loyal to Hitler and a strong supporter of Nazi ideology. Nevertheless, Halder was a product of the institutional culture of the officer corps and, unbeknownst to Hitler, was in fact a participant in a conspiracy against him.<sup>42</sup> Halder, in a manner typical of high ranking officers that found Nazi ideology attractive sought to integrate Nazi political aims into the conduct of war. However, as will be later be discussed, this approach met resistance both from Hitler, who would accept no compromise, and traditionalist officers no less determined to resist the politicization of war.

Ultimately, the replacement of army leadership was not without its repercussions, with opposition to Hitler within the army crystallizing following this perceived infringement on its sovereignty and coincided with concerns over the feasibility of Hitler's plans for expansion. The so-called Oster Conspiracy aimed at ousting the Nazis

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<sup>41</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 187.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of the opposition to Hitler within the German military, see Peter Hoffmann, "Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg in the German Resistance to Hitler: Between East and West," *The Historical Journal* 31, no. 3 (1988): 629–50, and Kenneth J. Campbell, "Colonel General Ludwig Beck: Conspirator," *American Intelligence Journal* 31, no. 1 (2013): 123–29..

spread substantially throughout OKH. Blomberg, Beck, and even Halder, Fritsch's replacement, were prepared to seize power should Hitler get the war he wanted with the Czechs. This plot was only narrowly averted by the Munich Agreement, and while it constituted the most extreme wing of opposition within the army, nonetheless represents the deep antipathy fostered by the Blomberg-Fritsch Affair and the establishment of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* would continue throughout the war. That in 1938, a year before the outbreak of war in Europe and nearly three years before the beginning of the German-Soviet War, the highest levels of army leadership were prepared to kill the head of state based on their own grand-strategic judgements illustrates the asynchronicity between the Nazi state and its army.

For the Germans, the Second World War began with the invasion of Poland. Hitler's triumph in the Czech crisis had caused much of the opposition within the German Army, including Halder, to gain faith in Hitler's strategic judgment. Thus, when the time came to plan the invasion of Poland this time as Gerhard Gross summarizes it, "...the military leadership without dissent yielded the strategic leadership to the Führer."<sup>43</sup> In contrast to later operations, the campaign in Poland was left to OKH to manage, perhaps due to the anticipated ease of the campaign. While German and Polish forces were not numerically dissimilar, numerous factors fatally undermined Polish defenses. German territory following the annexation of Czechoslovakia created an incredibly extended front for the Poles to defend and effectively turned Western Poland into a salient. Germany further possessed absolute superiority in terms of armor and aircraft, rapidly achieving air supremacy. As such, the campaign was conducted in traditional Moltkean style, with the wide front of the German-Polish border and increased mobility as a result of motorization

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<sup>43</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 194.

allowing for decisive encirclements of the Polish army that had proved impossible for the Germans in the First World War. While Hitler's prophecy that the Western Powers would not declare war to protect Poland was proven false, the swift victory gained in Poland allayed the concerns in OKH about a war on two fronts.

The conflict between Hitler and OKH flared immediately in the planning of the offensive against France. A combination of pessimism among OKH and Hitler's interference in the planning led to initial drafts that were unimaginative and accepted little risk, aiming only to drive back the Allies, gaining space to engage the Allies (particularly Britain) in a protracted war rather than decisively destroying enemy forces.<sup>44</sup> Hitler was dissatisfied by the result and ultimately a plan devised by Erich von Manstein, Chief of Staff of Army Group A, made its way through the personal politics of OKH to be approved by the Führer and become the actual operational plan used in *Fall GELB* (Case YELLOW), the invasion of France via the low countries. However, that Halder and Hitler agreed on the revised plan was a result more of coincidence than consensus; OKH understood the plan as an improvement in the vein of traditional German precepts of bold gambles aimed at a decisive outcome in battle, with the *sichelschnitt* (sickle-cut) maneuver promising a decisive operational result; Hitler understood only the tactical advantages.<sup>45</sup> Hitler's lack of comprehension of the operational level of war and his preoccupation with the tactical would be a source of friction between the operationally minded officer corps and a motivation for his manic micromanagement of the army. Ultimately the success of the Germans in the Battle of France was a result of institutional alignment on the question of the Manstein Plan (as filtered through Halder and OKH)

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 200

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 202

with this unity a matter of chance rather than the product of a cohesive system. The forces that led to the development of the original space-oriented OKH plan, including that of Hitler's interference, remained present and would continue to hinder German operations. When Manstein proposed the *Sichelschnitt* plan Halder, who disliked him personally, had him promoted away to the Eastern Front. Halder eventually agreed with what Manstein had initially proposed, but the system that produced this result was one of petty politics and held together by divergent reasoning agreeing on a singular approach, rather than being informed by an overall strategy. As Gross concludes, "Not the least owing to internal military power struggles, therefore, Germany entered World War II just as it had World War I, without a functioning political-military organization at the senior-most level."<sup>46</sup> Erich von Manstein, on October 24 1939, well before the Battle of France, wrote in his war diary that "[the question of how to defeat Britain] should have been addressed before we entered into a war, facing the question as early as 1939 of whether we would be up to the task in terms of armament and especially the inner resoluteness and strength of the army."<sup>47</sup> The factionalism that divided politics from war in German society had left Nazi Germany as bereft as the Kaiserreich of a political-strategic planning authority. Hitler lacked the capabilities to serve as such as much as Wilhelm II had, and further had no interest in ceding such authority to an agency or organization that could fulfill the role, at least partially as a result of his own megalomania.

The conflict between the Nazi regime and OKW on the one side and OKH, the traditional German Army, insisting on a traditional means of conducting operations and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 183

<sup>47</sup> Erich von Manstein, *Manstein war diary*, entry of 24 October 1939, MGFA, in Gross, 196.

on traditional relations between the civilian authority and the army had substantial detrimental impact on the conduct of operations. While in some cases officers continued plotting the outright overthrow of the regime, conflict between the OKH and the Nazi state manifested more substantially in pure factionalism. German officers felt aggrieved by the intrusion into what they felt was their fief and responded with obstinacy, directly arguing against Hitler's choices or simply refusing to follow or acknowledge orders. The panzer divisions in France lost contact with high command not because they had truly outrun their communications, but because they disagreed with their orders.<sup>48</sup> It is a crucial fact that by the outbreak of war this institutional conflict remained unresolved, with OKH retaining a distinct culture, tradition, and privilege, despite the steps the Nazis had taken to weaken it. Not only factional but institutional conflict regarding the role of the army through the Weimar Republic, the rise of the Hitler dictatorship, and through the outbreak of war profoundly influenced the planning and execution of operations as each faction and institution sought to advance its interests and wage war in the way it saw fit.

## The Red Army - The Tsar to Tukhachevsky

The Russian military was a markedly different institution from the Prusso-German military, with a drastically different composition, culture, and social standing. This difference became particularly apparent in the decades before 1914, as malaise and outright anti-intellectualism became prevalent in the Russian officer corps, while the Germans refined a system of extensive training and examination-based advancement. While the German Army was viewed as "the school of the nation" the

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<sup>48</sup> Citino, *The German Way of War*, 287.

Russian army was viewed as a backward institution that ranked distantly in the thoughts of Russian intelligentsia who identified more immediate targets of reform.<sup>49</sup> Russian intelligentsia as a result of less inclusive institutions were more skeptical of the nationalism that characterized many of their western counterparts in the late 19th century and were, therefore, more focused on achieving or opposing domestic reforms, rather than concerned about the strategic situation of the Russian empire. The resilience of the Tsarist regime and the strategic depth of Russia meant that questions of foreign policy were not existential, with defeat in the Crimean and Russo-Japanese wars being more significant for its domestic consequences than for any territorial losses. By the time the First World War broke out, the Russian military was still commanded primarily by aristocrats and consisted of ill-trained, ill-equipped, and poorly-motivated conscripts.<sup>50</sup> The failure of the Tsarist regime to provide the army with intellectual capital led to a force that was theoretically destitute and seriously unprepared to wage a world war. From 1914 to 1917 the Russian army was able to gain success, albeit at high cost, against the Austro-Hungarians at least and prevent the Germans from gaining a decisive victory. However, ultimately the institutional weakness of the Russian army, exacerbated by political turmoil on the homefront, including the abdication of the Tsar, allowed the Bolsheviks to successfully “turn the army Red” and weaponize the dissatisfaction of soldiers to create a civil war.

While the Imperial Russian military as an institution opposed the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war, with many of its high-ranking officers forming the

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<sup>49</sup> David Hendrik Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Alexander Watson, *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary in World War I* (Basic Books, 2014), 197.

leadership of the White Army, many officers nonetheless defected to the nascent Red Army. Tsarist military theory thus survived the revolution through the defection of numerous staff-educated officers to the Bolsheviks, including Tukhachevsky, Svechin, and Brusilov. The territory controlled by the Bolsheviks meant that many other officers were within the geographic bounds of the Bolshevik state and were thus pressed into the Red Army. Others joined voluntarily on pseudo-nationalist grounds as the Bolsheviks fought to expel the foreign invaders that were supporting the Whites.<sup>51</sup> In this manner, a measure of continuity in actuality existed between the Russian Imperial Army and the Red Army. However, the Red Army rejected this lineage, viewing itself as a culturally and politically Bolshevik organization. As a result, the Red Army viewed itself as revolutionary and emphasized itself as an unprecedented institution as a workers' army. As a Bolshevik institution, it was thus organizationally and culturally inextricably connected to the apparatus of the political party.

The total embrace of Bolshevik ideology and idealism proved detrimental to military efficacy, particularly in terms of discipline and expertise. To resolve this, Trotsky argued that officers needed to be military professionals, and the idea of electing officers that the Bolsheviks had implemented for ideological purposes needed to be undone as a matter of pragmatism.<sup>52</sup> Trotsky's ideological justification for this change (and also the rehabilitation of Tsarist officers) was that military competency was a technical skill and thus required technical experts to carry it out. In this manner, Trotsky to some extent walked back the politicization of war in Leninist thought by arguing that its carrying out was not necessarily a political act but a technical exercise, a form of skilled labor. This

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<sup>51</sup> McMeekin, *Sean McMeekin, The Russian Revolution: A New History (Basic Books, 2017)*, 282.

<sup>52</sup> Leon Trotsky, "Labour discipline, Order", speech to the 27 March 1918 Moscow City Conference of the Russian Communist Party, in Daniels, *Communism in Russia*, p. 93.

ideological view required accepting the premise that war was a science, with its experts--much like scientists--knowing or revealing truths and then carrying out actions based on objective information, rather than making independent judgement calls. While the ideological reasoning was convoluted, the end result of Trotsky's reversal was the establishment of an officer corps within the Soviet Union that much resembled the institutions of western nations, with staff colleges, military journals, and an institutional culture. The primary effect of Trotsky's ideological definition of military affairs was the extension of the Marxist belief of scientific social advance to warfighting and the creation of the Red Army as a socialist, pseudo-scientific institution with the responsibility to develop tactical, operational, and political-strategic competency in war.

A crucial contrast between the relationship between the German Army and the Nazi State and their Soviet counterparts is the fact that Red Army as an institution was a creation of the Bolshevik party. The totalitarian political structure of the Soviet Union served to further unify political and military interest. Eschewing any institutional continuity with the Tsarist army, the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, as it was formally known, was an explicitly ideological institution, being consistent with the totalitarian conception of socialism. The total political control exercised first by Lenin and then Stalin meant that the Soviet military developed at the direction of--and remained under the total control of--the political apparatus. This integration and subordination of the institution of the military to the political by the Soviets contrasts directly with the German situation. Even the militarily crushing terms of the Treaty of Versailles failed to end the institutional power of the German military. The Ebert-Groener pact reaffirmed its position and the consistent weakness of Weimar governments made impossible any

attempt to address the military's independence. In stark contrast, the Leninist principle of democratic-centralism entirely subordinated the army to political authority. The politicization of all aspects of society advanced by the Bolsheviks extended to the military and was effective in creating consistency between political ends and military means. The army itself, being ideologically oriented from its inception, had no ability or desire to resist the political direction given to it.

The experience of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War can be seen as responsible for the realism shown by Soviet authorities as the heavily ideological reforms applied to the military in the wake of the Revolution, such as electing officers, proved impractical and were dispensed with. The dire situation of the Red Army in 1918 allowed for no alternative. That the Bolsheviks were acting from a position of weakness tempered their ideological impulses, and military competence became a prerequisite for survival. In this manner, the political authority retained its primacy while also not smothering military thought. While the dynamic between Soviet civil and military authority was by no means model, with the presence of political officers a substantial detriment to efficacy, the domineering position of the political authority nevertheless constituted putting the horse before the cart, something that the Germans would not truly be able to do until 1938 at the earliest. Ultimately, the RKKA understood itself as an instrument of the political apparatus, advancing political goals (socialist revolution) through war. This subordination of the military to political authority stands in contrast to the insubordination and factional strife (both organic and orchestrated) that characterized relations between the German Army and political authority.

The Red Army did not have an institutional culture based on centuries of tradition and prestige. On the contrary, it was in many senses the first element of the Soviet state to come into existence, with Lenin's stratagem of gaining power through turning the army Red making its constitution one of the first acts of the Russian Civil War in earnest. From this, it understood itself as a fundamentally revolutionary body, tied to a particular ideology and particular party in a manner directly contrasting to the apolitical self-conception of the German Army. Lenin famously inverted Clausewitz to declare politics an extension of war; this concept carried through to the army's conception of itself as a political organ reciprocal to the party, carrying on the revolution through different means, but nonetheless united in mission. "Revolutionary war by the proletarian dictatorship is but the continuation of a revolutionary peace policy."<sup>53</sup> This concept was most directly embraced in Mikhail Frunze's understanding of the relationship between war and politics. One of the most highly influential Soviet commanders before his untimely death, Frunze's views illustrate an embrace of the highly political language of class warfare and world revolution. A revolutionary himself, Frunze represents the politicization of the Red Army and its self-perception as a political body, an extension of the revolutionary Bolshevik state rather than an institution of its own. The victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War, partially through gaining popular support combined with the universalist nature of Marxism, led to a conception in Frunze's writings that the proletariat within an enemy country would be sufficiently attracted to Bolshevik politics that it would constitute a decisive force in war. Frunze's understanding of war as a pure

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<sup>53</sup> "Theses of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern", 1928 in Albert L. Weeks, *Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-1941* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 8.

extension of the Revolution was checked by Soviet defeat in Poland, where the appeals to the proletariat were entirely militarily inconsequential.

Defeat, as it so often does, sparked reform in the understanding of the political and military. While the RKKA was still considered an entirely political institution, there was a renewed focus on the industrial-technical component of war and a corresponding development of the RKKA as a more independent institution. From this pivot the Red Army began to institutionally resemble the armies of western nations, viewing warfare in the Trotskyist sense, as a specific area of competency that, while political in nature, was sufficiently different from other forms of political action to require specific study. Throughout the late-Leninist and the pre-purge Stalinist regime, the Red Army flowered in its own sphere, ably grappling with the questions of future war and the means to avert the stagnant positional warfare of the First World War. Theorists and reformers such as Svechin, Triandafillov, Isserson, and Tukhachevsky created a competent and modern body dedicated towards the carrying out of Soviet policies. Stalin and the Politburo made their influence felt through the People's Commissariat of Defense (NKO) which acted as a war ministry, providing defense policy whereas the General Staff, empowered to draft war plans and develop theory was nevertheless under NKO authority.<sup>54</sup> During this time, the RKKA had developed what could generally be considered a healthy and effective relationship with its political superiors, with its role clearly understood and a willingness to work towards the political directives provided.

Despite the fundamental loyalty of the Red Army to the Soviet state there was nevertheless a deep antipathy between Stalin and the Red Army. This conflict was a

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<sup>54</sup> David M. Glantz, D. Graubeger, and M. Cleary, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of World War*, Modern War Studies (University Press of Kansas, 1998), 25

legacy of Stalin's personal hatred of Trotsky and Trotsky's role in the constitution of the Red Army. Trotsky's rehabilitation of Tsarist officers during the Revolution, a group Stalin had in themselves despised, developed this further. From Stalin's campaign at Tsaritsyn during the civil war he showed enormous disdain and hatred towards former Tsarist officers, even murdering them en masse out of hand.<sup>55</sup> This spite continued to be exacerbated through Stalin and Tukhachevsky's roles in the campaign against Poland, where each blamed the other for the failure.<sup>56</sup> Stalin quite typically took this personally, which fed his spite towards the institution that Trotsky had created. As a result, the very success of the Red Army engendered further spite from Stalin.

The culmination of Stalin's hate and paranoia was the Great Purge. Not only were the highest levels of leadership of the Red Army nearly annihilated, but more junior officers were purged as well, all on manufactured charges. While some of these officers were able to be recalled following the German invasion, the loss of institutional knowledge and cohesion caused by the purges was tremendous. What made the purge doubly damaging was that it was entirely unnecessary, the product of Stalin's personal faults rather than real institutional conflict. The RKKA was as politically reliable and ideologically congruent as any regime could wish a military to be. Stalin's position as commander-in-chief combined with the inherently ideological nature of the RKKA meant that there was practically no institutional independence to destroy. The Red Army had no ability or inclination to resist Stalin's directives. The RKKA was a fundamentally Bolshevik institution, requiring no purges to bring to heel. While the Nazis had lacked the

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<sup>55</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*, Vintage (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2007), 32

<sup>56</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin*, 34

ability to enforce its ideology on the German military during the interwar, Stalin had struck a blow aimed at doing so against a body already ideologically congruent.

The result was a Red Army that was a corpse of an institution, with an all-consuming culture of fear and emphasis on literal political correctness. The U.S. military attache in Moscow wrote, “The execution of the eminent former leaders of the Red Army... have produced in the the Red Army a feeling of surprise amounting almost to stupefaction. Morale has received a serious blow. It is probable that an entirely new draft of recruits will be required for the Red Army before it regains the high level of morale which it had attained before the trial.”<sup>57</sup> The very literal terror that the “Great Terror” had produced became the defining relationship between the army and the regime. Political concerns were not only brought to the fore, but made all consuming in an utterly unproductive fashion, where officers were concerned primarily with avoiding anything that might be grounds for denunciation. Soviet performance against the disintegrating Polish Army as it was ordered hurriedly to advance to the borders delineated in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact demonstrate the consequences of this warping of priorities.<sup>58</sup> In the succeeding invasion of Finland, Stalin wanted to demonstrate the ability of the Red Army after a lackluster performance and to emulate the mobile successes of the Wehrmacht in Poland.<sup>59</sup> For this reason he rejected plans which called for a concentrated thrust through the Karelian Isthmus in favor of a more complex assault along a wide front that promised a more grandiose victory. This decision, informed by policy concerns relating to prestige and deterrence was ultimately a poor one considering the actual state

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<sup>57</sup> “Treason Trials, Red Army,” *USSR (Combat-Army)*, G-2 Report No. 875-6320 (Washington, D.C.: Military Intelligence Division, War Department, 12 June 1937). Classified secret. Quoted in David Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Mary R. Habeck, *Storm of Steel: The Development of Armor Doctrine in Germany and the Soviet Union, 1919–1939*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Cornell University Press, 2014), 288.

of the Red Army. The ensuing humiliation of the Soviets at the hands of the Finns achieved the exact opposite of its intended policy, with the rough handling the Finns were able to give the Red Army reinforcing German preconceptions of Soviet weakness. That the Soviets suffered horrendously in overcoming the hardly equipped Finns contributed to German confidence in the outcome of a war. Glantz cites a Soviet retrospective as reporting that “Hitler’s military was ecstatic. The chief of the German General Staff, General von Beck, in assessing the military situation in the summer of 1938, said that the Russian Army could not be considered an armed force, for the bloody repressions had sapped its morale and had turned it into an inert military machine.”<sup>60</sup> In this manner, Stalin had transformed the Red Army from an effective tool of the state into a woefully inefficient body hardly capable of enacting the will of the political authority against even a small country such as Finland. The atmosphere of terror created through the purges and hyper-politicization of the conduct of war killed initiative and meant that channels for communication between the state and army were non-functional, as no officer was willing to deliver bad news or raise potential problems with an approach for fear of appearing disloyal. An example of this is Stalin not being informed of the shortage of winter equipment before the invasion began.<sup>61</sup> Thus, in one of the harshest winters on record, the Red Army advanced along a wide front, unequipped for the temperature, and led by officers more concerned with retaining their status as politically reliable than operating effectively. This state of affairs was not sustainable.

To the credit of Stalin’s judgement, these issues were identified and an ambitious program of reforms were planned; however, the purges continued even through the

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<sup>60</sup> O.F. Suvenirov, “Vsearmeiskaia tragediia” [an all army tragedy], *Voennostoricheskii zhurnal* 3 (March 1989): 44, quoted in Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 31-32.

<sup>61</sup> Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 30.

outbreak of war.<sup>62</sup> The military disaster of the Winter War exposed the weaknesses of the post-purge Red Army and allowed some vital-but far too late-reform to take place. While Stalin's rejection of the initial plan as too conservative was ultimately deleterious, it nevertheless demonstrated an appropriate relationship between the political and military authorities in the Soviet Union. Operational plans were developed by military professionals at the direction of the political authority, which had the ability to accept or demand revisions to these plans. While Stalin, in this case, made the wrong decision, it was nevertheless appropriate that he make such a decision, as the operational question as to whether to attack through the Mannerheim Line or along a broad front had inherent political consequences. Stalin was equally in the position to make the correct decision to seek to reform the Red Army with a greater focus on competence and a less-smothering emphasis on political reliability. In his fear of a threat from the army against his power, he had weakened it to such an extent that it was no longer credible for defending his regime from foreign powers or as a tool of policy. However, his paranoia remained persistent as did the resultant purges that, while less extreme, nevertheless represented a detrimental force from the civilian government on the conduct of operations.

The blistering period of expansion and reform that followed the Winter War was ultimately insufficient to place the Red Army on equal footing with the Wehrmacht in 1941.<sup>63</sup> Stalin, while he recognized that the security situation required a massive program of rearmament, failed to articulate clearly an overarching defense policy, instead providing the General Staff, NKO, and military districts with rapidly changing and frequently contradictory guidance.<sup>64</sup> However, as Glantz writes, some badly needed

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<sup>62</sup> Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 29.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

ameliorative measures were implemented. "...on 12 August 1940 the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet issued a decree, "On Strengthening the One-Man Command in the Red Army and Navy." The decree abolished the hated institution of military commissars, which had been introduced in May 1937, entrusted 'full responsibility for all spheres of life and activity of subunits, units, and formations, including political work and political education and the state of discipline, into the hands of commanders.'<sup>65</sup> However, intrusive political influence as a result of paranoia did not end with the abolition of commissar as Glantz points out: "...in the event that thoroughly covered commanders deviated from proper performance, the position of deputy commander for political affairs was retained at all levels of command."<sup>66</sup> The continued presence of political officers constituted a detrimental influence of politics on the conduct of operations. Stalin's paranoia represented the defining relationship between civil and military organs in the Soviet Union, strangling its ability to act as a competent, professional body and severely limiting its utility as a tool of policy. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union possessed the advantage of an army that was a fundamentally loyal institution willing to accept political direction from the regime.

## Conclusion

By the outbreak of war the battles between military and political authority in Germany and the Soviet Union were still ongoing. Stalin's ever-present sense of insecurity resulted in purges that savaged the morale and leadership of the RKKA as well

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<sup>65</sup> Suvenirov, "Vesrmeiskaia tragediia", 46.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 32.

as the imposition of political officers that undermined and restrained the leadership abilities of those that remained. Stalin, so concerned about the political threat posed by the institution of the army, took measures that almost entirely reduced its ability to act as a political tool of the Soviet state, as was seen in the failed invasion of Finland, in which the Soviets were forced to settle for far less than they had desired at a cost in men and materiel far in excess what was necessary. The conflict between the institution of the German Army as represented by OKH and the new Nazi state was less overtly destructive on the organizational and tactical levels than that between Stalin and the Red Army, however the rank factionalism led to the organizations having entirely different strategic concepts that were irreconcilably different. The creation of the nominally superior but de-facto parallel authority of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* along with the appointment of personally loyal officers to leadership positions within OKH was a deft blow to the independence of the German Army. However, this weakening of its independence was accompanied by all the problems inherent in the creation of a redundant authority and the promotion of individuals on the basis of loyalty rather than competence. In this manner, Hitler mirrored Stalin in miniature in sacrificing efficacy for political reliability. However, the unreliability of the army in the German case, with the benefit of hindsight, is a matter of fact rather than the product of paranoia as it was in the Soviet case. The Oster Conspiracy that nearly led to a coup in 1938 would endure until the July 20 (1944) Plot led to a massive crackdown on the army and the denunciation of those involved. Thus, by the start of war, Hitler had weakened the power and independence of the army, but also its efficacy while ultimately had not succeeded in bringing the institution of the army into alignment with Nazi strategic goals. The army

still considered itself the supreme authority in times of war and intended to fight a war in the manner of its choosing, with a clear delineation between military and political spheres. While the younger officers that embraced the totality of Nazi ideology controlled OKW, OKH remained in actual control over the German Army and represented a bastion of traditionalist military thought.

As of June 1941, the institutional conflicts between the army and the state in both Germany and the USSR remained not only unresolved but a defining feature in the manner in which politics and policy manifested in the conduct of operations. Beyond the questions of operational art or theoretical understandings of the proper relationship between the army and the state, the actual politics of fear, pride, and simple personal hatred represented a crucial axis of determining if and in what manner specific operations would be undertaken. Perceptions of the German-Soviet War can all too often reduce it to a question of doctrine, theory, or the individual being right or wrong. However, the basic emotions of pride and insecurity fed both the banal turf wars of inter-office politics playing out in the highest echelons of Nazi Germany and resulted in a blind, paranoid slaughter in the Soviet Union. In this manner, examining the institutional and personal conflicts allow for an analysis and comparison of German and Soviet approaches to the relationship between politics and war not merely in the abstract but in a comprehensive manner that addresses the vital role of *friction* in their conduct.

# Theory - Independence and Integration

## Introduction

Both the German and Soviet armies understood their relation to civilian authority not only in terms of the practical politics of institutional conflict but also in normative terms on the basis of military theory. For the Germans, Moltke the Elder, Schlieffen, and Seeckt were the most influential in defining the appropriate relationship between political and military authority whereas, for the Soviets, Lenin and Trotsky were preeminent. Both schools considered Clausewitz and his unfinished work *On War* to be their shared ancestor. While the interpretation of this work and the arguments within it varied dramatically between the two traditions it nevertheless served as a common source and language through which the two frequently interacted. In this manner, shared theoretical concepts of the relation between war and politics formed a common framework through which German and Soviet officers conceptualized the delineation between political and military spheres, allowing for useful comparison. In both cases, war was understood as a political act. Soviet theory went so far as to declare no clear delineation between war and politics. Nevertheless, even the Soviets needed to answer the question as to where the sphere of the military professional ended and that of the political professional began. On the part of the officers, this question was rooted in interpretations and understandings of military theory.

Military theory in this manner became both a tool for officers to understand their own relation to policy but also as an intellectual bludgeon in the inevitable conflicts regarding whose purview a specific decision fell under. Both officers and politicians

could cite theory to argue their own case in institutional conflicts. The institutional cultures that developed varying theories and interpretations of theory caused frequent frustration between the political and military authorities and complicated the task of aligning policy with military action. The role of politics in war in this manner is grounded not only in the institutional conflicts between the army and the state but in the theoretical understanding of each body's proper relation to the other. The normative nature of theory thus represents a source of entrenched institutional conflict beyond mere factionalism or personal enmity. An understanding of the theoretical relationships developed in both Soviet and German intellectual traditions allows for a greater understanding of the ideal towards which adherents strove.

## The German Army - Clausewitz to Beck

Carl Phillip Gottfried von Clausewitz (1780-1831) is not only a foundational figure in German military theory but in military thought in general. His magnum opus, *On War*, represents the only enduring work in Western military tradition that seeks to create a universally applicable theory of war. In contrast to contemporary theorists such as Antoine Jomini and Friedrich von Bülow, Clausewitz did not seek merely to create rules or guidelines for other commanders but aimed at defining the nature of war. Rather than focus on questions of marching order or interior vs exterior lines, Clausewitz introduced concepts such as friction (the tendency of unpredictable difficulties mounting upon one another to make simple actions difficult), the center of gravity, and the definition of war as a political act. *On War* is known primarily for its exceptionality as a

work that creates a comprehensive theory of war and secondarily for its impenetrability. Clausewitz's untimely death of cholera in 1831 left his work in a thoroughly unfinished state. Clausewitz was well aware of the deficiencies of his manuscript and had intended to revise it for the sake of coherence and consistency. While the first book (of eight) had been revised by the time of his death, Marie von Brühl (1779-1836), Clausewitz's wife, undertook the unenviable task of compiling and editing his plethora of disorganized papers for publication. Despite Marie doing her utmost, *On War* is manifestly incomplete, to the point that extracting Clausewitz's intentions and conclusions can be an ordeal. While his core concepts are present, the wide-ranging nature of the work (addressing everything from the nature of war to the tactics of river crossings) means that intense study and academic discourse have been needed to reveal them. Unfortunately, this level of study was not undertaken until after the second half of the twentieth century, leaving the most significant effects of the work not in its meaning but in its misinterpretations. The historiography of the use of *On War* within the German General Staff reveals a book much-lauded but infrequently read, highly influential but drastically misinterpreted.<sup>67</sup> In the English speaking world, Clausewitz (and the Germans' use of him) entered the mainstream initially through the blame placed upon him for the carnage of the First World War by British theorist Liddell Hart. Since, however, Clausewitz has been acquitted of this charge by the "Clausewitz Project" at Princeton in the 1960s, which produced the Howard-Paret translation of *On War* that remains the standard version of the work.<sup>68</sup> This development coincided with the resurgence of Clausewitz in American

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<sup>67</sup>Herbert Rosinski, "Scharnhorst to Schlieffen: The Rise and Decline of German Military Thought" 29, no. 3 (1976): 83–103, 100.

<sup>68</sup>C. Bassford, *Clausewitz in English: The Reception of Clausewitz in Britain and America, 1815-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 128.

military circles during the 1970s and 1980s in the wake of the Vietnam War. Before Hart's villification of Clausewitz, *On War* was little read in the English speaking world. Thus, from the publication of the work shortly after Clausewitz's death until its reappraisal there was significant divergence from the author's intentions. A wealth of academic discourse has centered around the manner and timing of this divergence.

Herbert Rosinski argues in his work *Scharnhorst to Schlieffen: The Rise and Decline of German Military Thought* that German military theory reached its apex during the period of Clausewitz and Scharnhorst and began to decline immediately afterwards due to conservative reaction. This decline culminated in the Schlieffen/Moltke plan that Germany followed upon the outbreak of war in 1914. With its precise timetables and prescription for military action without regard for political concerns or objectives it was a development antithetical to Clausewitz's concepts of war and, in Rosinski's view, devoid of military theory. Antulio Echevarria, another Clausewitz scholar, criticizes Rosinski's conclusion (that German military thought declined from the era of Clausewitz) in his work *Borrowing from the Master: Uses of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the Great War*<sup>69</sup>. Echevarria argues that thinkers beyond Clausewitz developed useful theories of modern war, integrating newly developing technologies into its conduct. However, this criticism of Rosinski fails to acknowledge the unique dimension of Clausewitz's writing: the fact that it was a comprehensive study of the *nature of war as a whole*. Rosinski's thesis is not that German military thought died with Clausewitz, but that no succeeding German thinker fully internalized and expanded upon Clausewitz's theories relating to war. Instead, they followed the course of both the elder and younger

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<sup>69</sup>Antulio J. Echevarria, "Borrowing from the Master: Uses of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the Great War," *War in History* 3, no. 3 (1996): 274–92.

Moltke and Schlieffen by paying lip service to a work that, while venerated, was ultimately infrequently read by German officers. Even as Clausewitz was exalted, succeeding German thinkers nevertheless insisted that war possessed a logic of its own that civilian and political forces had no influence in, thereby directly contradicting Clausewitz's assertion of policy driving military action. The decline described by Rosinski is not a decline in practical military thinking in terms of tactics, maneuvers, and logistics but of a lack of continuity between Clausewitz and later thinkers leading to a general abandonment of attempts to further develop a comprehensive theory of war. Rosinski argues that while *On War* was sanctified in German intellectual tradition, only particular elements relating to the attack and annihilation were internalized and widely disseminated. As a result, the form of Clausewitz's work that was ingrained in the institutional culture of the German military was not Clausewitz as he was and as he wrote, but Clausewitz as Moltke (and later Schlieffen) desired him to be.

Echevarria in fact acknowledges this deviation. Revealingly, he writes, "Hence, by the 1870s, treatises on the subject of war had less to do with discussing its nature, as Clausewitz had done, than with examining its practical conduct."<sup>70</sup> This distinction is precisely what Rosinski was referring to in his depiction of the dearth of strategic thinking and questioning of the nature of war following the so-called, "classical period" of German military thought. With Schlieffen alone and unchallenged, the German theory of war became theories of tactics and operations, with concepts that had defined Clausewitz's thinking, such as varying centers of gravity and war as a tool to achieve political ends, left behind. The scope was reduced from questioning what war was to determining how best to fight a battle or campaign. Despite the harsh tone Echevarria

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<sup>70</sup>Echevarria, "Borrowing from the Master," 278.

takes with Rosinski's work, he in fact confirms the limited understanding of German theorists following Clausewitz. "While von der Goltz' and Schlichting's uses of the master [Clausewitz] do not suggest a particularly thorough grasp of his thought, their ideas, if not wholly original, were nonetheless intended to be seen as legitimately rooted in the soil of Clausewitz' general concepts."<sup>71</sup> While German military thought was certainly "rooted in the soil of Clausewitz' general concepts" its lack of a "thorough grasp of his thought" had equal if not greater influence on the German theory of war. As a result of this lack of engagement, Clausewitz's actual intentions were obscured by a focus on the more technical aspects of war and limited engagement with the theoretical and a proscribing of the political.

Many of Clausewitz's straightforward principles such as the preference for attack over defense or the importance of seeking to win wars through annihilating opposing armies were readily understood and adopted by the Prussian army, but his more theoretical statements relating to the nature of war and the appropriate relationship between the army and political authority were hardly acknowledged. The adoption of the former principles without their counterparts led to a system that could not be accurately described as Clausewitzian. While the debate regarding Clausewitz and his applicability continues in the 21st century, extensive academic study and historiography have succeeded in providing an accurate and comprehensive interpretation of Clausewitz's writings. Clausewitz's conclusion that politics must therefore inform the conduct of any given military operation may seem obvious, yet represented a radical proposition in the 19th century, especially to the highly royalist and aristocratic Prussian military, relying on a published draft that was inexpertly edited. Clausewitz's advocacy for the primacy of

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<sup>71</sup> Echevarria, "Borrowing from the Master," 285.

policy over military interest was seen as radical, particularly to the aristocratic Prussian military, thereby not only making misinterpretation more likely but providing political motivation for rejecting Clausewitz's conclusions. The officers of the Prussian army were primarily of the lesser-noble *Junker* class for which the institution of the army and the privileged position it held within Prussian society provided access to honor, pride, and political power. This meant that any proposal to subordinate the army to the civilian (and middle class) government would represent a ceding of that position and the influence and prestige associated with it. While the Prussian reformers, of which Clausewitz was a member, believed that major changes to society were needed as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, such views fell out of fashion after the failed revolutions of 1848 which caused a swing towards more conservative sentiments. While Clausewitz spoke to the broader principle of war as an act of policy, the examples he utilized were ripe for misinterpretation by conservative monarchists, as the political and military united in the single person of the sovereign did not reaffirm the hierarchy between them. Both Napoleon and Frederick the Great are cited by Clausewitz as the most prominent recent examples of military genius. As head of state, the sovereign is inherently responsible for the political dimension, meaning a campaign conducted by the sovereign brings military action into congruence with the political interest of the state. Thus, military actions taken by the sovereign will be informed by political interest as a result of the unity of responsibility. While this does not preclude the ability of the sovereign to pursue poor policy or conduct operations poorly it serves to prevent friction from conflict between the wishes of military officers and the demands of civilian policymakers.

The lack of clear separation between military and political authority in wars in which the sovereign was commander-in-chief (CIC) meant that they did not serve as explicit examples of Clausewitz's advocacy of civilian primacy. For this reason, a conservative-monarchist reader of *On War* could understand these examples as privileging the monarch rather than privileging political interests as Clausewitz intended. However, the prospect of the monarch actually fulfilling the duties of the CIC became less viable both politically and practically. In the 19th century, the absolutism that had characterized the 18th century waned, being supplanted by the forces of nationalism unleashed by the French revolution. Even highly conservative countries were forced to reform in such a way as to be able to utilize nationalism as a matter of national survival. The Prussian reforms of 1807, for example, ended serfdom, permitted local self-government, and opened the ranks of officers to the middle classes.<sup>72</sup> The mass mobilization and high morale that the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic armies could count on as a result of nationalism forced similar reforms across Europe to gain the same advantages. Further, economic growth and the resultant broadening of the middle class led civil society to strengthen and the political dominance of the aristocracy to decline.

The simultaneous professionalization of the military and the growth of the bureaucracy of the state made the soldier-kings of previous centuries an inefficient solution. The growth of the size of armies meant that the role of CIC was as much of a professional administrative function as it was a leadership role. Practically speaking, it was not possible for the sovereign to personally command the army as well as oversee the running of the bureaucratic state. Further, the clear detriment of placing the monarch in command was the inability to guarantee the competence of the monarch as a commander.

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<sup>72</sup>Citino, *The German Way of War*, 128.

No matter the military education provided, the position of monarch was not one attained by meritocracy. A king disinterested or incompetent in matters of war meant a disinterested or incompetent CIC. Prussia experienced the former under Friedrich Wilhelm II (1786-1797) and the latter during the War of the Fourth Coalition under Friedrich Wilhelm III (1797-1840), which ended with Prussia's humiliation at the hands of Napoleon. The Prussian reforms that followed led to the abolition of serfdom and the creation of a constitution in an effort to inspire nationalism. The institution of the military was, while under the king's direction, left to operate professionally from the 1807 reforms onwards, with monarchs generally refraining from interfering with the decisions of professional officers. Thus, political and military decision-making apparatuses diverged in the case of Prussia-Germany and the military understood itself as an institution independent of the state. While the danger of an incompetent monarch exercising personal command was eliminated, the danger of friction between the views of the civilian government and those of the CIC was introduced. Clausewitz understood this danger and thus advocated for coordination between the civilian government and the CIC in times of war. The military side of the reforms of 1807 had been headed by Clausewitz's colleague Scharnhorst, with Clausewitz himself playing a role in the reorganization. Thus, Clausewitz stood apart from his successors in German military theory in perspective, having viewed war not merely as a soldier but as a reformer. His advocacy for the primacy of policy was in no sense an accident but rather a product of his own experiences. Clausewitz, having himself taken explicitly political action, was not as institutionally immured and insulated from political questions as succeeding officers were. In this manner Clausewitz, as written, represents an intellectual tradition distinct

from the strong institutional factionalism that would drive succeeding German thinkers and contributed to the growing divide between the army and the state.

The rejection of Clausewitz's formula for relations between the civilian government and the army was simultaneous with the proliferation of his work. If Clausewitz was the grand scholar and theoretician, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder was the practitioner that brought his theories to prominence. Moltke's successes in the wars of German Unification (1866-1871) made him the most influential figure in German military history since Frederick the Great. Through Moltke and his dramatic successes in the German wars of unification, *On War* became the veritable Bible of the German General Staff. However, *On War* was first distorted into a form that excised political considerations from operational planning almost immediately by Moltke the Elder. The elder Moltke's writings and conduct in the German wars of unification serve as a primary source that demonstrates the rationale and manner by which elements of *On War* were warped to theoretically justify a German Army independent of political direction. While only a small portion of Moltke's written works survived the destruction of the war archives in 1945, the writings that remain present his views unambiguously. When counterposed to Clausewitz's actual assertions clearly illustrate the theoretical gulf between the two understandings. Additionally, the resulting resistance to the primacy of the civilian government that Clausewitz deemed necessary constitutes a vital effect of this reading of Clausewitz. Further, in this manner theory has an inertial effect of the institutional culture of the German General Staff on developments that would have empowered the civilian government, whether in military theory or in political developments.

Not just in German military theory but also in historiography, there has been a treatment of Moltke's and Clausewitz's ideas of war as congruous. Moltke is frequently portrayed as a studious executor or disciple of Clausewitz's theory of war, to the point that Clausewitzian theory and Moltkean practice are treated as singular entity.<sup>73 74</sup> This grouping is misleading. Moltke can be understood most accurately as a lens through which Clausewitz's writings were distorted. Moltke adopted Clausewitz's assertions regarding the nature of war in terms of the conduct of operations, friction, the relation between the attack and defense, and especially uncertainty, but neglected Clausewitz's assertion of the primacy of policy in making war and therefore the Clausewitzian trinity of People, Army, and State. Moltke either ignored or reinterpreted Clausewitz's theories relating to the proper role of civilian political actors in the making of strategy so as to be opposite to his intended meaning.

Moltke explicitly writes "Policy must not be allowed to interfere with operations... What policy can do with his victories or defeats is not his business."<sup>75</sup> This is totally inconsistent with Clausewitz's own views on the role of policy which, far from "interfering" with operations, ought to inform them. Crucially however the first edition of *On War* reads: "If war is to be fully consonant with political objectives, and policy suited to the means available for war, then unless statesman and soldier are combined in one person, the only sound expedient is to make the commander-in-chief a member of the cabinet, so that the cabinet can share in the major aspects of his activities." Whereas O.J.M. Jolles translation of the second edition's rendition of this passage alters the latter

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<sup>73</sup> Citino, *The German Way of War*, 142

<sup>74</sup>Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy: from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, edited by Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 548

<sup>75</sup>Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 36.

part to read as follows: “that he may take part in its council and decisions on important occasions.” While the difference in language between these two editions is subtle, the meanings are almost totally inverse. In the first case, the cabinet takes an active role in the decisions of the commander-in-chief. In the second, the commander-in-chief takes the active role in the decisions of the cabinet. In the former, the civilian government has control over the conduct of war. In the latter, the commander-in-chief is given influence over the decisions of the civilian government. Whether the misinterpretation of Clausewitz was a deliberate decision or unintentional is unable to be definitively determined. However, the fact that the second edition of *On War* reversed the meanings of Clausewitz’s passage on the relation between the civilian and the military at the revision of his brother-in-law suggests the misinterpretation was unintentional. It is unclear which edition Moltke read (much less considered definitive) but it is no accident that the editor of the first edition and Moltke came to the same erroneous conclusion regarding Clausewitz’s intentions. From the point of view of the Prussian military aristocracy, the idea of advocating for civilian direction of military operations and the subordination of military needs to those of the political was inconceivable, especially from Clausewitz, one of their own. From their point of view, it seemed most intuitive that Clausewitz intended the military to advise the cabinet of its own needs rather than the reverse. The distinction, while subtle in diction, represents the gulf between an arrangement in which the civilian government takes an active role in the waging of war and one in which the military operates independently while advising the civilian government of its needs. The former (Clausewitz’s position) meant the supremacy of the civilian government over the military, whereas the latter preserved the independence of

the military from civilian authority (Moltke's position). The inversion of this dictum from Clausewitz was enormously consequential for the development of German civil-military relations and German operational art, through increasing the perceived distance between war and politics.

Thus what Clausewitz's theories revealed about the need for the primacy of policy in the political act that was war was ignored by the Prussian military establishment for, ironically, political reasons. To accept Clausewitz as written would have meant reducing the independence and prestige of the army. Moltke himself was instrumental to the continuation and adaptation of the principle of independence to the more modern wars of German unification, providing both independence to both subordinate commanders but also extending that to the military as an institution. Moltke's strengths as an organizer and commander contributed to the decline of German military theory. His willingness to give broad license to subordinates and only issue general directives fed the cult of autonomy and lack of accountability within the German Army.

The failure to embrace the indelible connection between the political and the military led to a failure to integrate potential political concerns and objectives into operational planning and military theory. The political aspect affected which states the German military would have to face in war. The consequence of the conflict between Moltke and Bismarck and the failure by the Germany army to internalize the relationship between policy and war as outlined by Clausewitz was that the political was excised from German military theory. German thinkers, holding up Moltke as the soldier *par excellence*, understood strategy in theoretical terms as creating the circumstances for decisive tactical victory.<sup>76</sup> This understanding lacked the link between the tactical success

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<sup>76</sup> Rosinski, "Scharnhorst to Schlieffen," 97.

and political ends of a war that Clausewitz deemed the essence of strategy. As Gerhard Gross concludes, “For the most part, the General Staff only considered military problems on the operational-strategic level and rarely on the strategic-political level. In the final analysis, the General Staff, which Moltke had expanded during his tenure to become Germany’s primary operational planning and command authority, lacked the necessary competencies to function at the political level.”<sup>77</sup> In this manner, the theory of war that Moltke had produced had removed the role of political apparatus from directing war, deeming it an entirely military matter, and creating a normative basis for boundless authority for the army in what he considered were “military matters,” not subject to the purview of any civilian government.

The intensification of this theoretical school may be seen in the theories of Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the German General Staff from 1891-1906, and the consequences of planning war irrespective of political aims. His thinking may be seen as the logical result of a culture that denied the effect of the political on the conduct of operations. Schlieffen created a war plan<sup>78</sup> that made no allowances for variations of the political situation and pursued what Moltke’s theories had advocated for: total victory irrespective of politics.<sup>79</sup> The most fundamental difference between his war plan and Clausewitz’s thinking is the absence of the discussion of political objectives. Clausewitz succinctly defines what he sees as interaction between tactical victory and strategy. “The original means of strategy is victory—that is, tactical success; its ends, in the final analysis

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<sup>77</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 54

<sup>78</sup> R. Foley, *Alfred Von Schlieffen’s Military Writings*, Military History and Policy (Taylor & Francis, 2012), 163.

<sup>79</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (London, W.i.: Oswald Wolff, 1958), 134.

are those objects which will lead directly to peace.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, in the view of Clausewitz, Schlieffen’s war plan only sought the means of strategy (tactical success) but did not consider how to use the means to achieve the ends (peace). The intellectual ancestry of this deficiency is the view of Moltke that political concerns (such as creating the conditions necessary for peace) were matters of policy that could be modified by politicians and were thus beyond the pale of military planning. Moltke’s solution to this was to leave the question of peace to politicians and seek continual tactical victory until the enemy no longer had the capacity to resist. Rather than accept Clausewitz’s dictum that the political purpose of war necessitated the direction of the military effort by policymakers, Moltke erected an intellectual barrier between matters of policy and matters of war.

This fiction was exposed in the Schlieffen Plan and Germany’s defeat in the First World War. Liddell Hart’s infamous castigation of Clausewitz as the architect of the slaughter of the First World War is therefore a charge better laid at the feet of Moltke rather than Clausewitz. It was only through disregarding Clausewitz’s statements of the effects of the political on the conduct of war that such absolute war without purpose could be carried out. Clausewitz specifically decries the theoretical concept of “apolitical” war that Moltke would develop, stating “If we were to think purely in absolute terms, we could avoid every difficulty by a stroke of the pen and proclaim with inflexible logic that, since the extreme must always be the goal, the greatest effort must always be exerted. Any such pronouncement would be an abstraction and would leave the real world quite unaffected.”<sup>81</sup> The “inflexible logic” that earns Clausewitz’s derision in

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<sup>80</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton Paperbacks (Princeton University Press, 1989), 143.

<sup>81</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 78.

this passage ironically came to pass through Moltke's misinterpretation of his work and conflicts with civilian authorities. While perhaps naively dismissing the realism of such a possibility, Clausewitz accurately describes the dangers of such an approach. "It would often result in strength being wasted, which is contrary to other principles of statecraft."<sup>82</sup> The First World War was able to reach its extremes because the influence of statecraft over the conduct of war was removed in Germany. Clausewitz expressed ultimately unjustified faith that human nature would not allow war to be driven to extremes through logical abstraction. He was unable to foresee that the exact inverse of his principle of the relationship between war and politics would become a dogma within the German military.<sup>83</sup>

Schlieffen's extremist interpretation of Moltke the Elder's theories was moderated by his successor, Moltke the Younger. As Gross argues, the younger Moltke was more similar in his understanding of war to his uncle rather than Schlieffen.<sup>84</sup> As such Moltke the Younger sought to increase coordination with other political-military organizations within the German state as well as formed a conception of operations more influenced by political developments than Schlieffen's view of war permitted. While the Elder Moltke's views had been reduced to the dogmatic denial of policy on operations by Schlieffen's tenure, his actual views permitted considerably more nuance. For example, in a manner directly contradicting Schlieffen's abandonment of strategy (as described by Rosinski), Moltke the Elder writes "It greatly depends on the political situation whether it is right at the risk of heavy losses during a war to plan the battles in such a way that they aim for annihilation, or to choose the safe path and achieve the goal through a series of less

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<sup>82</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 78.

<sup>83</sup> Rosinski, *Scharnhorst to Schlieffen*, 100.

<sup>84</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 94.

decisive successes.”<sup>85</sup> While Moltke believed that military affairs ought to be conducted without the influence of politics and therefore rejected the primacy of politics that Clausewitz advocated for, he nevertheless expressed a far greater regard for the political goals and situation than Schlieffen had accepted. Moltke the Younger embraced the concept of greater flexibility and a theoretical framework more reactive to political considerations.

Nevertheless, the institutional culture of the German Army had by this point been strongly shaped by Schlieffen. The failure of the Schlieffen-Moltke Plan in 1914 and Moltke the Younger’s consequent disgrace resulted in a retrenchment of German military theory into Schlieffen’s school. Moltke the Younger was scapegoated both during and after WWI as someone who had failed to understand Schlieffen’s genius with his concessions towards responsiveness to the political situation and rejection of dogmatism being seen as weakness and indecision. Even in 1938, General Georg von Sodenstern remarked on operational leadership “Only few attain the level of artistic skill. Often they suffer the hard fate of Count Schlieffen, which then becomes their people’s fate too. They do not get the chance to prove their skills, and they have to entrust weak hands with their tremendous intellectual legacy.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, the same “departmental egoism” that Schlieffen had used to justify failing to attempt to cooperate with the war Ministry (or any other body for that matter) in operational planning endured and continued to prevent the acknowledgement of the primacy of policy and political organs in providing strategic direction to operations.<sup>87</sup> This departmental egoism was crucially firmly founded in the

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<sup>85</sup> Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, quoted in Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 42.

<sup>86</sup> Georg von Sodenstern, quoted in Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 178.

<sup>87</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 97

theories of war developed by Moltke and Schlieffen that were based in an inversion of Clausewitz's own views.

This impulse manifested with particular potency in the Weimar Republic during Hans von Seeckt's tenure as Chief of the *Truppenamt*. Seeckt's own distaste with the parliamentary regime fed a strict interpretation of the Schlieffen concept.<sup>88</sup> Seeckt, along with many other officers, felt little attachment to the republic, affording it hardly any legitimacy. The army, on the other hand, was, despite its colossal failure in the World War, still considered a vaunted and prestigious institution worthy of respect. As such, Seeckt felt nothing approaching any kind of impulse to subordinate the storied Prusso-Germany Army to a Republic that many conservatives considered as being made up of traitors. During this period the German Army, its practical power reduced by treaty limitations, became even more insular. In terms of theory, this was represented by a removal of the role of policy and politics to an even greater degree, as Seeckt and his compatriots had little interest in the desired foreign policy of the Weimar government. Instead, the narrative of the German Army as an apolitical body, not only removed from politics, but above and outside of it, was reinforced. This self-conception corresponded with the near total elimination of political-strategic thinking as a matter theoretically beyond the purview of the army, shifting its focus to tactics, maneuver, and the employment of novel technologies. The increased theoretical divide between the German Army and politics shaped the manner in which conflict with political authority was viewed. Rather than acknowledging the legitimate (and necessary) role of political

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<sup>88</sup> For more on Seeckt military thought, see Matthias Strohn, "Hans von Seeckt and His Vision of a 'Modern Army,'" *War in History* 12, no. 3 (2005): 318–37.

authority in providing direction and context to the army, such measures were viewed as unacceptable violations of its independence and the theory that underpinned it.

The fragile political state of the Weimar Republic led to an increased emphasis on the theoretical role of the army as possessing total competency within a state of war. The focus on maintaining the monopoly on legitimate violence possessed by the army led to Seeckt's rejection of Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel's proposed use of a people's war to resist the materially superior western powers in the event of invasion in order to buy time for Germany to mobilize.<sup>89</sup> This concept, while fanciful, was nevertheless the most realistic theory proposed as to how the Versailles-limited Reichswehr could wage war. Seeckt, however, believed fervently in the principle of strict division between civilian society and the army and so absolutely ruled out the arming of the populace.<sup>90</sup> The ubiquitous street violence of the Weimar Republic offended the conservative sensibilities of the aristocratic elite that made up the officer corps and fed Seeckt opposition to admitting any political influence into his understanding of the role of the army. The theoretical understanding of the role of the army within the state and the monopoly on legitimate violence it possessed necessitated such views.

Chief of the General Staff during the early Nazi era, Ludwig Beck in no way moderated Seeckt's stance. As Gross writes, "The army's leadership believed that any future war would be a continental European land war, and logically the army leadership should be responsible for operational planning and the command and control of overall operations. The struggle to establish the senior-level organization, therefore, was not only a struggle to maintain the historical identity of the General Staff within the German

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<sup>89</sup> Gil-li Vardi, "Joachim von Stülpnagel's Military Thought and Planning," *War in History* 17, no. 2 (2010): 193–216.

<sup>90</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 150.

armed forces, but also Beck's attempt to prevent the intervention of politics into operations, which based on his convictions was the exclusive domain of the General Staff."<sup>91</sup> A vital impetus to the factionalism that poisoned the German Army's relationship with other branches and institutions was the firm theoretical divide between war and politics. While this served the material interest of the army in terms of preserving its privileged status, it was also firmly grounded in the intellectual tradition of Schleiffen, Moltke, and Seeckt. In this manner, the institutional struggle between the army and the civilian government was legitimized through theoretical logic that placed operations in a sphere entirely outside of politics. This conflicted with succeeding civilian governments' conception of the theoretical relationship between war and politics, particularly that of the Nazi government, whose conception of racial struggle extended to every level of society, particularly that of the army. This inconsistency in understandings of the nature of war on the theoretical level profoundly affected German concepts of operational planning through competing theories as to the nature of war and the appropriate relationship between the institutions of the state and the army, with these opposed theories forming the intellectual nucleus for the institutional conflicts that would affect the operational-strategic policy of Germany during the war.

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<sup>91</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 179-180.

## The Red Army - Lenin to Isserson

Soviet military theory was based in Bolshevik ideology and in Lenin's own theory of war. Eschewing continuity with Tsarist theories of war, Clausewitz's concept of a unity between war and politics was seized upon as an opportunity to create a Marxist theory of war. War as an extension of politics meant that war was an extension of the society and economic system that produced it. Historical materialism in this manner was adapted into a theory of war, with the concept of war and revolution being indistinguishable in theoretical terms. "From a study of Clausewitz, Comrade Lenin wrote: "From new phenomena in the field of military art, only the most insignificant part must be ascribed to new inventions and new ideas; the majority is ascribed to new social principles and new social conditions."<sup>92</sup> Clausewitz's style in *On War* was heavily influenced by Hegel's dialectical method which created a stylistic connection with the works of Marx and Engels. In Clausewitz's dialectical, the thesis of unlimited, "ideal" war met with the antithesis of war restricted by friction to create a synthesis of "real" war modified by the forces of the trinity of state, people, and army. Marx and Engels were tangentially influenced by Clausewitz's writings and Clausewitz proved popular among communist movements due to this association. Lenin was particularly inspired by *On War* as Clausewitz's emphasis on the unity between politics and war appealed strongly to Lenin and his militant-revolutionary sentiments that could be justified through a particular reading of Clausewitz's theories.<sup>93</sup> While Clausewitz emphasized the role of war as a tool of political ends, Lenin viewed the unity that Clausewitz described as a legitimation of

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<sup>92</sup> Isserson, "The Evolution of Operational Art" 53.

<sup>93</sup> Lenin, "Political Report of the CC," Seventh Emergency Congress of the RCP(b), 7 March 1918, PSS, vol. 3, pp. 15-16.

the use of violence in pursuit of political aims. In this manner, the revolution carried out by the “professional revolutionaries” of the Bolshevik cadres was war (class war), and aggression by the Red Army was not merely war, but revolutionary violence. This theoretical understanding ideologically characterized both the Bolshevik takeover of Russia as well as Bolshevik campaigns to retain the territorial integrity of imperial Russia.

Lenin’s exalted position in the canon of the Soviet Union led to the proliferation of the understanding of war and politics being united. Within Soviet military thinking his thesis that war was an ideological act and thus a revolutionary one was central. Lenin’s relationship with Clausewitz solidified the position of politics in the theoretical framework of Soviet military thinking and of Clausewitz’s actual writings as a source for Soviet understandings of war. However, rather than placing this in the context of focusing military means for the purpose of achieving distinct policy objectives as Clausewitz intended, the Soviet understanding became couched in the language of ideology and dogma. Soviet military theory became oriented towards the revolutionary total war defined by the class struggle prophesied by Marx and engrained by Lenin.<sup>94</sup> The total unity that Soviet ideology suggested between war and politics limited Soviet military thinking through its extension of Marxist class struggle to the nature of war. The characterization of all war as an ideological death-struggle was rooted in a misinterpretation of Clausewitz that advocated for total war, something Clausewitz in actuality termed an “absurdity.” This ideology of existential struggle altered the role of politics from one of restraining war from its absolute, as Clausewitz had systematized it under the assumption of a rational state, to a force driving war to its utmost extremes.

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<sup>94</sup> Isserson, “Operational Prospects for the Future,” in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 81.

While declaring total conceptual unity between war and politics was simple enough, such a pronouncement risked obscuring the technical aspect of waging war. The heady fanaticism of the revolution was quickly moderated by the uncompromising demand for efficacy brought about by civil war. Trotsky, tasked with forming the Red Army, made theoretical alterations in order to allow the incorporation of former Tsarist officers without sacrificing ideological purity. The result was a corollary that defined the practice of war as a science and thus something that could be utilized for socialist purposes without rejecting the knowledge of army experts as “imperialist” due to their service to the Tsar.<sup>95</sup> The definition of military expertise as a science profoundly influenced Soviet theories of war. Both the question of the conduct of operations and the Soviet view on the relation between the military and the political were impacted. Marxism was understood as scientific and particularly in its Bolshevik form took on a militant evangelism that made the relationship between politics and war theoretically one of total unity. Svechin states, “War is undertaken for specific political aims, and its main features are determined... by politics.”<sup>96</sup> Trotsky as first head of the Red Army was instrumental in developing and propagating this universalist and historicist view of militancy. In this view, with class war taking the fore, all class struggle was war and all war (fought by the Soviet Union) was a form of class struggle, as aforementioned in the Theses of the Comintern. However, Trotsky’s reduction of the conduct of war to a technical-scientific exercise carved out a clear niche where Soviet theories of war and operations could develop. So long as they did not contradict ideology, they need not be driven by it as it was able to be viewed as a form of expertise in service of socialism.

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<sup>95</sup> Trotsky, “*Labour, Discipline, Order*,” 93.

<sup>96</sup> Svechin, “Strategy and Operational Art”, in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 6.

An example of this is the Soviet understanding as to the theoretical development of operational art. “Objective reality advanced the requirement for the creation of a new branch of military art which would encompass questions of the theory and practice of operations, i.e., operational art. Thus operational art was a logical consequence of the change in the character of armed struggle, reflecting the appearance of its new phenomenon - operations.”<sup>97</sup> As is demonstrated, war and the phenomena contained were considered objective phenomena that were outgrowths of social development in the Marxist framework. Thus, a capitalist/imperialist state would wage a capitalist/imperialist war whereas a socialist state would wage socialist war. The Soviet acceptance of the Marxist concept of historical materialism caused the interpretation of all wars as the product of the political system that produced them and thus colored by its structure. “Politics is viewed [regarding imperialism] both as the overall aim of the war for which war is only a means and, conversely, as a means for preparing to serve the needs of war itself in the field of foreign and domestic policy.”<sup>98</sup> This conception of war demonstrates the acceptance of Lenin’s modified version of Clausewitz’s maxim within Soviet military thought. In this manner, the methods used to conduct the war were ideologically irrelevant; no matter how similar cosmetically the means, this ideological development gave an intrinsic character to Soviet war, allowing Soviet thinkers to develop ideas of war based on efficacy rather than ideology. The theoretical unity between the army and the revolutionary state gave a unity of purpose for the Red Army: revolutionary war to advance Bolshevik ideology. Thus, within the Soviet framework, the technical or

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<sup>97</sup> David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle*, Cass Series on Soviet Military Theory and Practice 2 (London, England ; Portland, Or: F. Cass, 1991), 18.

<sup>98</sup> Varfolomeyev, “Strategy in an Academic Formulation,” *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 5.

scientific development of military affairs including operational art was further viewed as an ideological triumph and as means to achieve a specific political end. The limited ideological prescription for what a socialist army or a socialist war would look like allowed Soviet officers to develop military thought with considerable freedom from ideological constraints. This view of scientific ideological essentialism that had been constructed in fact allowed for intellectual freedom within the technical aspects of waging war. More concisely, as whatever Soviet thinkers produced was considered inherently a “socialist means of war” they were largely free to produce what they wished.

The change in Soviet thinking from a heavily ideological and political concept of war to a more technical one can be seen in the difference between M.V. Frunze’s “Unified Military Doctrine and the Red Army” published in 1921 and Isserson’s “Evolution of Operational Art” in 1932. Frunze writes: “Three years of activity by the political sections and communist cells of the Red Army have already brought sufficiently tangible results in the sense of the broad Red Army mass's political education in a new spirit...”<sup>99</sup> This emphasis on the ideological and psychological aspects of the Red Army characterized early Soviet military thinking, resulting from limitations in materiel as well as a means of utilizing the revolutionary fervor to increase elan. In the context of the Russian Civil War, such methods were an efficacious means of maintaining cohesion, morale, and propagating the political message of the Bolshevik party to a swayable populace. The forces deployed against the Bolsheviks in the civil war were equivalently poorly organized and supplied. As such, the theories and methods were appropriate for waging a civil war across the vast, largely agrarian territory of the Russian Empire with severely

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<sup>99</sup> M.V. Frunze, “‘Unified Military Doctrine and the Red Army’ (1921),” accessed August 6, 2020, <http://www-personal.k-state.edu/~stone/FrunzeDoctrine>.

limited industrial capacity. The constitution of the Soviet Union into a distinct state that purported to be the militant vanguard of the revolution spurred the development of increased military-industrial capacity and a necessity to develop a theory of war suited for war between industrial states. Trotsky's innovation of declaring war a science provided the intellectual framework for adapting Soviet concepts of war towards a less ideological paradigm as a result of a shift in material circumstances. Isserson, when discussing the development of the operational as a level of analysis demonstrates the relative liberty provided by the understanding of military thought as inherently revolutionary. "Our Civil War of 1918-21, with its crushing, deep attacks up to the final enemy defeat, undoubtedly marked the beginning of a new era in the history of armed conflict. Clausewitz said of the wars of the French Revolution: 'Revolutionary wars turned all old things upside down and drove from Chalons to Moscow itself.'"<sup>100</sup> As is seen in the case of Isserson with the question of operations, the theoretical framework created by the Soviets allowed for all technical questions of war to be answered without political interference as such developments were championed as triumphs of socialist science.

The relative freedom of army thinkers rebounded sharply with Stalin's consolidation of power. The army's status as an independent institution (by Soviet standards) was enough to allow Stalin to imagine a threat from that quarter. Trotsky's involvement in its founding and the fact that the ideological justification for its independence was created by Trotsky further alienated the army from Stalin. Stalin's hatred of the former Tsarist officers that were naturally prominent in the institution on account of its youth deepened this antipathy. These factors set the stage for the utter

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<sup>100</sup> Isserson, "The Evolution of Operational Art," *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 49.

gutting of the officer corps during the purges and the movement of Soviet military theory towards an emphasis on ideological purity and expressions of loyalty towards Stalin.<sup>101</sup> The politics of overt loyalty stifled both discussion and implementation of Soviet military theory. Even during the reforms that Stalin allowed following failure in the Winter War, Commissar of Defense S. K. Timoshenko in a speech on 31 of December, 1940 emphasizes “Finally, the conference laid the foundations of current military psychological indoctrination of our command cadres. From here they will spread to the fighting man as well. This will guarantee the high moral indoctrination of our forces, without which modern war cannot be waged.”<sup>102</sup> The emphasis on the psychological and ideological factors was characteristic of the increasing overt influence Stalin exerted on the army through measures such as the introduction of commissars and political officers. This concept replaced the technically and efficacy minded and in many ways ideologically insulated Soviet theory of war with one that second-guessed officers to ensure ideological coherence.

Even before Stalin’s decimation of Soviet thinking, ideology subsumed politics in Soviet theory, providing a framework that left no room for addressing concrete political aims of a conflict. The oversimplification of the political dimension of war to a conflict between imperialist and socialist powers gave moral right to the military adventures of the Soviet Union but also limited the analysis of the political dimension to the politically correct rather than the practical reality. It succeeded in creating an army institutionally subordinate to the political authority, but limited the ability of that army to create a theory for the attaining of the political objectives sought. Marxist dogma depicted a death

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<sup>101</sup> Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 33.

<sup>102</sup> Timoshenko, “Closing Speech of the People’s Commissar of Defense of the USSR , Hero and Marshal of the Soviet Union S. K. Timoshenko at Military Conference held on 31 December 1940,” 95.

struggle between the forces of socialism and those of world capitalism, through which a world revolution would occur and bring on the socialist future. “Proceeding from the revolutionary-class content of our future war as a decisive encounter of worlds which exclude one another, we must proceed much further and require considerably more of our military theory.”<sup>103</sup> This teleological view inherently limited the political objectives for war as it was necessarily an existential class war. Thus, the theories developed focused exclusively in this political direction, being placed in a framework that inherently sought the most extreme political goal. The Winter War illustrated the manner in which theory diverged from reality, with logistical realities forcing a moderation of objectives. Operational plans had been drafted seeking the ideological goal of the overthrow of the Finnish system regardless of the lack of means to accomplish this. Soviet ideological purity was in this case sacrificed in order to achieve more limited goals in the ultimate peace settlement. However, in the case of the Second World War, Clausewitz’s depiction of theoretical war without limits that Soviet ideology embraced practically became reality, legitimizing their assumptions regarding a total war, only that the war was a racial one based in fascist ideology rather than an effort on the part of the forces of world capitalism. In this manner, while the Soviet theoretical understanding of the relationship between the army and political authority was in no sense flawless, the army understood its role as being defined by the state, rather than operating autonomously. Stalin did not trust the army to keep to this understanding and as a result tightened political control of the institution to such a point that its effectiveness had been savaged by 1941.

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<sup>103</sup> Isserson, “Evolution of Operational Art,” *The Evolution of Operational Art*, 54.

## Conclusion

German and Soviet theories of war created normative frameworks for the relationship between war and politics in both the conceptual and institutional senses. On the eve of war between the two powers, the theoretical relationship between war and politics in both cases was in a state of flux. The Red Army was frenetically attempting to reform itself in the wake of the Great Purge and failure in the Winter War all while Stalin continued to exert tight political control over the institution, limiting the ability and inclination to create a practical theory of war and destroying any resemblance of a healthy relationship between the army and the state. The German Army on the other hand sought to operate under its preexisting theory of war that denied the right of the civilian state to impose political objectives. In neither case was a practical or theoretical consensus on the relationship between political goals and military ends reached. Further, the political theories created by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union operated under ideological assumptions that removed politics, in the Clausewitzian sense, from war. While both nominally embraced Clausewitz and therefore accepted the thesis of war as the pursuit of policy with the addition of violent means, the extremity of the political goals sought by the ideologies in question drove war towards its philosophical ideal in a manner counter to Clausewitz's predictions. Clausewitz developed his theory in the context of the 19th century, where *Raison d'état* served as a rationalizing and thus constraining force on war. The force of passion was ascribed by Clausewitz to "the people," an entity distinct from government, which was made up of statesmen. The ideological fanaticism of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were unanticipated. The extremist rhetoric used by the Nazis and the Soviets that demanded an end to either the

racial or economic “other” thus intensified rather than moderated war and brought about a social fanaticism that drove war to its most extreme expression and created an unprecedented theoretical relationship between war and policy. In the normative sense, Clausewitz’s trinity of reason, passion, and chance, in the case of Germany and to a lesser extent the Soviet Union, is unfulfilled, with difficulties being encountered as a result of a predominance of passion over reason.

On the eve of war, the Soviet Union appeared to be the state more consumed by passion than reason, though this paradigm would reverse as the war progressed. With the German Army in 1941 far from fully Nazified, war was thought of in much the same terms it had been in the First World War, as an imperialist, nation-aggrandizing endeavor but not commonly understood as the literal racial death-struggle Hitler understood it as. In Germany, the conservative military establishment and the Nazis were united in an interpretation of Clausewitz that emphasized total war however this definition of total war meant drastically different things to the two parties. The army viewed total war in the terms of the primacy given to the military in the First World War, where civilian society and industry would devote themselves entirely to supplying and supporting the efforts of the military aimed at victory. By contrast, the Nazis viewed total war in radical terms, constituting the total politicization of society and its alignment to Nazi ideology. Hitler remarks on and indeed complains about the disconnect between Nazi ideology and the army’s theoretical understandings of war. “It [the war with the Soviet Union] is a fight with the great opponent of our *Weltanschauung* [worldview], a struggle for life and death in which each soldier must feel like a political fighter and act accordingly. The German officer and soldier is far too deeply rooted in the conceptions of an antiquated era. It is

impossible ever to overcome Bolshevism with these principles of a chivalrous, purely military conduct of war.<sup>104</sup> This incongruity in ideology is a marked contrast with the uniformity that pervaded Soviet theory. The theoretical nature of war as an existential class struggle was never questioned by Soviet thinkers, nor did Soviet commanders lack such ideological indoctrination. Despite this, it was Stalin and not Hitler that had imposed political officers with sweeping authority to ensure ideological consistency.

In this manner, by June of 1941 the Red Army and the Heer had both developed counterproductive relationships with ideology, with the Red Army having had excessive political influence applied to every level despite being made up of fully indoctrinated officers, and the Heer accepting Nazi direction but not internalizing the political goals of the regime. Thus, while the Red Army had always been a Bolshevik institution that developed Bolshevik theories of war, even before Stalin's imposition of hyper-politicization, the German Army retained a German theory of war but made no attempt at integrating Nazi objectives into it, let alone establishing a Nazi theory of war as Hitler would have wished. In this way, the German theoretical understanding of the appropriate relationship between the army and political authority was placed in opposition to political goals of the Nazi leadership. As this conflict developed, Stalin had destroyed the pragmatic relationship that Soviet theory had created between the army and the state and replaced it with a regime of terror implemented by political officers. The success or failure at resolving these contradictions dramatically impacted the efficacy of the armies involved.

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<sup>104</sup> P. M. Baldwin, "Clausewitz in Nazi Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 16, no. 1 (1981): 5–26, 12.

# Operational Art and its Salience to War and Politics

## Origins and Importance

Operational art emerged as a distinct level of war within military discourse following Soviet study in the interwar period, though its existence is often considered to have begun with the Napoleonic Wars. Social developments created a situation in which states were for the first time able to field multiple armies, making multiple battles relating to one another through variations in time and space a crucial element of war.<sup>105</sup> Antoine Jomini's concept of grand tactics and Clausewitz's treatment of strategy are both viewed as progenitors of the concept of operational art. While these theoretical writings on the subject provided significant basis for the concept, the discursive development of operational art is generally attributed to the Soviets. The Soviets in the interwar codified the operational as a level of war and unit of study, as opposed to previous works that dealt with the conduct of operations but did not necessarily draw clear distinctions between tactics, operations, and strategy.

The concept of levels of analysis for war requires definition as the terms will be used extensively throughout this work. A contemporary view can be seen in US Joint Chiefs of Staff in Joint Doctrine Note 2-19 which defines strategy by the following: "Military strategy is the creation, employment, and articulation of the military instrument of national power to achieve policy objectives."<sup>106</sup> The traditional German view is

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<sup>105</sup> Glantz, *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, xiii.

<sup>106</sup> JDN 2-19, Strategy, II-1

illustrated as Moltke quotes Clausewitz's definition before providing his own, "General von Clausewitz, said Strategy is the use of the engagement for the goal of the war.' In fact, strategy affords tactics the means for fighting and the probability of winning by the direction of armies and their meeting at the place of combat."<sup>107</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, Clausewitz's definition, being more congruent with contemporary understanding of the term will be used for "strategy." Moltke definition falls instead within the realm of operational art but constitutes an incomplete definition of that term as well. The presence and influence of Moltke's understanding of strategy is nonetheless crucial to understanding the German view of operations and strategy through the Second World War. US Army FM 3-0 "Operations" defines the term as follows "An operation is a military action, consisting of two or more related tactical actions designed to achieve a strategic objective in whole or in part."<sup>108</sup> Svechin writes "We understand an operation in military art as the sum of various actions directed toward the achievement of one of the aims advanced by strategy."<sup>109</sup> The similarity between these two definitions is striking and by no means coincidental. This definition includes Moltke's concept of the massing of forces for tactical advantage as one of the subordinate actions aimed at an intermediate objective. In summation, for the purposes of this work, strategy consists of determining which goals that can be achieved through military action (for example the destruction of an army or the capture of territory) will lead to the desired political outcome. Operations consist of the efforts to achieve these intermediate military goals, such as maneuver and choosing in what location and what manner to engage in battle. Tactics consists of the means and methods utilized to conduct a battle. As a result, strategy is the most

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<sup>107</sup> Moltke, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 47.

<sup>108</sup> FM 3-0 "Operations"

<sup>109</sup> Svechin, "Strategy and Operational Art," 22

politically influenced level of war, with operations being directly influenced by strategy and thus indirectly by politics; tactics is most insulated from political concerns.

The term “operations” will be used over “grand tactics” as originally used by Jomini. In this paper to draw a clear distinction between the tactical level of war, which trends towards military science, being generally unaffected by the political objects of a war and the operational level of war, which is both military art and science. The strategic level of war constitutes the inverse of the tactical in that it deals most directly with the political. The strategic level of war consists of determining which military objectives will lead to a positive peace. The name “grand tactical” implies that the conduct of operations is an extension of the tactical, and thus a fully military act, outside the political. There is nevertheless a properly grand tactical and fully technical (military) aspect of operations in the maneuver of large formations to create favorable circumstances for a battle. However, this aspect of operations is indelibly connected with the political dimension of operations through the influence of strategy. In order to emphasize this distinction, the latter term will be used. To frame the question in Clausewitzian terms, operational art can be defined as the utilization of tactical success to achieve an object of strategic-political value. This definition encompasses the grand tactical sense of operations in that the technical skill of maneuver is combined with the strategic-political question of the appropriate axis of advance, focal point, and determination of the culminating point.

Clausewitz, drawing lessons from the Napoleonic Wars, the period in which the operational or grand tactical was considered to have first emerged, is one of the seminal figures in the study of this level of war and particularly within German and Soviet formulations of it. Clausewitz did not recognize a distinction between the strategic and

operational levels of war. This fact has significant implications for German military thought due to the mythical status afforded to Clausewitz by succeeding German thinkers. While the Marxist teleological view of history encouraged the addition of the operational level of war to the formulation Clausewitz's writings on the levels of war and his lack of disambiguation between the operational and the strategic influenced the German Army's later near total neglect of the strategic level of war.

Operational art represents the level of war that is influenced most strongly both by political concerns and by technical (military) concerns. Soviet theorist G.S. Isserson defines its relation thusly: "The operation is a tool of strategy, while strategy is a tool of politics." In other words, operational art can be understood as the building of strategic success out of battlefield victories, with strategic success being defined in political terms. It is significant in that it is the level of war that connects the elements of violence, passion, and chance with the political aspect of war. While the strategic level of war is the most directly related to politics, the role of operations in connecting battles with strategic objectives imbues it with political purpose. Specifically, the role of operational art is the utilization of battles to achieve strategic-political success. Operational art thus inherently involves a directly political dimension in that it is the use of victory on the battlefield to advance the political interests of the regime that is waging war. The political interests and ideology of the governments involved thus immediately weigh in on the question of operations, with certain operational arts more or less suitable for the political objectives sought.

Clausewitz's understanding of the relationship between the strategic and political is vital to distinguishing the strategic and the operational (despite his use of the terms

interchangeably). Strategic objectives may be defined as those that act as substitutes for the desired political gains. These are objectives that are attainable through military means and create a strategic situation in which the enemy is willing to accept the political goals desired. The Svechin alludes to Clausewitz when he writes “The most skillful strategic offensive leads to catastrophe if available means are inadequate to achieve fortuitously the ultimate aim, which guarantees us peace.”<sup>110</sup> Clausewitz continues that the strategic objective varies in proportion both to the magnitude of the political demands and the disposition of a belligerent towards a protracted war. Thus, while the strategic object and the political object remain distinct, the strategic can be defined as the art of translating the political into tangible military terms. Clausewitz did not draw the terminological distinction between the strategic and operational levels of war, enabling the German Army’s focus almost exclusively on operational art and operational planning and its refusal to engage with the fundamental question as to how the political objectives of the government were to be fulfilled. In this manner, the strategic level of war was largely designated as politics and deemed inappropriate for the army to be involved in.

Comparing German and Soviet understandings of operational art has clear relevance through the examination of divergences in contributing to the outcome of the 1941-45 war. The armies of the two belligerents entered the war, despite a shared intellectual currency, with opposing conceptions of the relations between military and political matters. The German approach omitted the political element, as beyond the scope of the military and thereby under no circumstances integrated political aims in the conduct of operations. Operations were only undertaken for political purposes when the political authority took a role in operational planning, an occurrence that became more

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<sup>110</sup> Svechin, “Evolution of Operational Art,” *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 17.

common as the war progressed. In direct contrast is the hyper politicization of the Soviet Red Army. “Revolutionary war by the proletarian dictatorship is but the continuation of a revolutionary peace policy.” Soviet military theory understood both war and peace as means of advancing the revolution. Thus Soviet operations were indelibly aligned with Soviet political aims and placed within the ideological framework of revolutionary war.

The politicization of operational art in both Germany and the Soviet Union evolved over the course of the war. This dynamic relationship affected the operational and strategic successes and failures of the war. The development of a highly effective cooperation between political and military leaders in the Soviet Union contributed to that state's ultimate triumph. On the other hand, Germany's failure to resolve the institutional conflict between the military and the Nazi regime had tremendous deleterious consequences. The institutional knowledge of the vaunted German officer corps and general staff were destroyed in their conquest by the Nazi regime. The following led to an absence of a coherent operational art, as the military thinking was subordinated entirely to ideology. Operational art further acts as a means of investigating the manner in which each party viewed the relationship between the operations being undertaken and the political goals sought. At the outbreak of war, both the Germans and Soviets had varied concepts of operational art that were based on their differing understandings of the political aims of the war they would be called upon to fight. The suitability of these operational arts for the political aims sought thus had tremendous impact on the actual conduct of operations.

## German Operational Art

Despite the emphasis within German military thought on the flexibility and initiative of individual commanders, the lack of consideration given to the strategic level of war limited the breadth of the German concept of operational art. While the Germans were incredibly proficient in the technical aspect of operations, the replacement of varying strategic objectives with the dogmatic concept of the battle of annihilation or *vernichtungsschlacht* constrained the strategic directions in which operations could be directed. German operational art was devoted entirely to the strategic objective of destroying enemy formations regardless of the political aims sought by a government. A commander had discretion and was expected to take the initiative in terms of exploiting opportunities to accomplish this goal, but the objective of annihilation was one that was prescribed. The replacement of the strategic level of war with invariably seeking annihilation meant that a German commander was not expected to make decisions based on a particular strategy that will lead to a peace that fulfills the political purpose of a war. Instead annihilation was pursued as a substitute to political considerations and it was assumed that the defeat of the enemy's army could take the place of strategy and deliver the political goals desired. Based on Moltke's formula, it was assumed that following such a decisive tactical-operational victory circumstances will have been sufficiently altered to attain whatever concessions were desired. This strain of military thought was ingrained through the rigorous examination system that ensured the quality of Prusso-German officers as well as the intellectual culture of the officer corps and general staff..

The German view of operational art was more than half technically focused as a result. The excision of strategic concerns from the responsibility of commanders meant that operations were a question of when and how to contribute to the encirclement and destruction of the enemy rather than seeking to utilize opportunities to achieve strategic objectives (as influenced by the policy goals of a war). Tactical success was seen as an end in itself rather than viewed in the context of its utility towards achieving political goals. The consequences of this absence can be seen in the futile strike at Amiens in 1918 which, while achieving substantial tactical success drastically weakened Germany's political-strategic position. Svechin accurately identifies this defect "Ludendorff, who demonstrated outstanding achievements in operational art, was not able to combine several of his operational successes so as to achieve even the slightest positive results in concluding a peace for Germany; in the final analysis, all his successes were of no service to Germany." Without a strategic framework on which to hang operational success the German way of war could not fulfill the policy objectives sought by the regime it served.

While this fact was clear to the Soviets, the Germans categorically denied this issue. The Schlieffen Plan was still held up as the exemplary. Moltke was vilified for his execution of it and Schlieffen portrayed as a mastermind that was failed by his successor. In reality, recent scholarship has drawn into serious question the possibility of Schlieffen's plans.<sup>111</sup> The distances involved and the lengthening of the front through the invasion of the Netherlands were, with the benefit of hindsight, clearly impossible. Schlieffen, as the General Staff tended to, dismissed concerns regarding how far and how fast an infantry corps could march with appeals to superhuman effort. Further, Schlieffen's Plan crucially had no regard for the political objectives of the war and led to

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<sup>111</sup> Gross, 93

the bizarre situation of Germany invading France in response to Russia's mobilization in support of Serbia.

Ultimately, following the defeat in the First World War, the German Army denied any kind of crisis within the German way of war, pointing to successes such as Tannenberg to discount the failure of the Schlieffen-Moltke Plan to achieve its objective. All the blame was placed on errors on the part of individuals involved in its planning and execution. Thus, the same principles that Schlieffen and Moltke had planned the operation based on, including flanking maneuvers and encirclements, were not considered flawed, despite the fact that the German Army had not developed the tactical innovations necessary to carry them out. That the ideals of German warfare could not be realized by the technical means available was essentially ignored by German military thinkers, with the orthodoxy insisting that proper execution of the principles of war would inevitably bring about victory. This dogged insistence on the traditional precepts of German warfare led to a further lack of introspection regarding the role a lack of strategy played in German defeat. The lack of connection between individual operations and the political goals they sought to achieve was entirely ignored by the German Army who instead maintained the view that had the First World War been better fought it could have been won.

Nevertheless, the Reichswehr during the Versailles constrained period was forced by strategic realities to acknowledge the role of politics in war. The restriction of the army to 100,000 men meant that defense against an invasion was essentially impossible. Thus, all interwar war plans that were based on the existing force of the Reichswehr (as opposed to plans drafted under the assumption of a prospective lifting of treaty

restrictions and expansion of the Reichswehr) were based in a short term active defense that sought to retain control of territory while waiting for foreign intervention to either change the strategic situation or force a conclusion to the war. Details such as the nature of this foreign intervention and the military objectives most suitable for obtaining it (and indeed, how likely it was it at all) were not explored in the war plans of the Reichswehr. However, this nevertheless represented a major deviation from the operational thinking of Moltke and Schlieffen. As a matter of necessity, specifically as a function of weakness, the German Army was forced to abandon the philosophy of the invariable pursuit of total victory through annihilation and instead develop operational plans as a political tool. The acknowledgment of the greater diplomatic situation that predicated German planning in this period was essentially forced on the German Army through the highly apparent inadequacy of the Reichswehr to stop aggression from Poland, much less France or the Soviet Union. However, these realistic war games and exercises were undertaken only half-heartedly in comparison to the zeal with which the Reichswehr developed itself as a cadre for the eventual expansion of the German Army into a great-power army. These developments were viewed as conditional measures that were the result of weakness, with traditional German concepts being entirely suitable for the army of a great power.

In this way, the Reichswehr did not view the defeat of the German Army in the First World War as the result of systemic problems with the German way of war but rather as a technical question of its execution. In the view of German interwar theorists, the question was how to re-do 1914 but win, rather than seek to answer the question as to why Germany was unable to find a favorable conclusion to the war once the initial offensive had stalled out. The question of the breakthrough was investigated, with means

of overcoming static defenses being considered particularly important in the opening of hostilities, but the prescribed remedy for positional war was maintaining mobility through rapid operations and refusing to allow it to develop. This, in many ways, hearkened back to the traditional formulation that was common in Schlieffen's writings of overcoming theoretical difficulties in conducting operations through an appeal to superhuman efforts on the part of the German soldier.<sup>112</sup> As was shown in 1914, there were absolute limits to how quickly masses of men could move along a front, regardless of psychological or spiritual factors.<sup>113</sup> Had the lessons of 1914 been better learned, the difficulties of fighting with a horse-army across the vast territory of Russia would not have proved as much of a surprise as they were.

On the other hand, to some extent, the Germans were not unjustified in believing the German way of war not to be fundamentally shaken by defeat in the First World War. Since Moltke the Elder won the Battle of Sedan, the battle of annihilation had become the fundamental currency of the German way of war. In the view of German interwar thinkers, the basic failure of 1914 was in failing to attain such a decisive encircling battle. Debate raged about who was responsible for this failure and what particular decision prevented the attainment of a decisive encirclement or breakthrough to Paris. The focus of these debates was on tactical and operational matters, questions of deployment and axis of advance rather than questions of strategy. For this reason German interwar thinking was tremendously focused on tactical and operational efficacy and innovation. What the Germans had learned from the First World War was not refighting the war of 1915-1918 but rather refighting the initial months of hostilities in 1914 but better and

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<sup>112</sup> Gross,

<sup>113</sup> Ring of Steel

particularly, faster. The neglect of strategic concepts fostered an intellectual culture focused on the tactical, the technical, and the operational. Tanks and aircraft received significant attention within the Reichswehr ironically at least partially due to their prohibition by the Treaty of Versailles. That the Entente had deemed it necessary to ban Germany from acquiring such armaments represented a powerful argument within German military thought as to their utility.<sup>114</sup> German operational thinking developed an increasing “do or die” attitude which focused exclusively on attaining absolute victory through a battle of annihilation while neglecting to consider the possibility of failing to attain such a battle or such a battle failing to achieve absolute victory. The Germans developed advanced capabilities in maneuver war but lacked a theory to unify such operational techniques with the political objectives of a war, instead assuming that consisting seeking battles of annihilation was a substitute for strategy. A further indictment of German military thinking in the interwar is the continued refusal to consider variations in political objectives that may make the seeking of total victory both unnecessary and counterproductive.

The focus on the battle of annihilation and of seeking the total defeat of the enemy that had its origins in Moltke the Elder’s victories in the Franco-Prussian War effectively eliminated the strategic level of war from German discourse. This fact is in contrast to the no less dramatic success that Moltke enjoyed in the Austro-Prussian War. However, the Battle of Königgrätz fails to fulfill the post-Moltke vision of the German way of war. The Austrians were not totally defeated, nor did the Prussian Army succeed in encircling and annihilating the Austrian army. The focus on the Franco-Prussian War and the neglect of the political consequences of an unnecessarily protracted war limited

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<sup>114</sup> Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg*.

discourse within German military thought. This is significant as the German way of war was most effective when it could be defined by fast, aggressive action that sought to rapidly change the strategic situation, with the new strategic situation forming the basis for concluding a favorable peace. The preoccupation with total victory obscured what, definitionally, ought to be the purpose of any military campaign: creating the circumstances for the negotiation of a favorable peace. In this manner, even following defeat in the First World War, the German Army neglected the strategic level of war and continued to utilize its outsized political influence to demand the seeking of total victory, regardless of the interests of the civilian government.

This way of war, suited towards the short, sharp wars of Moltke's era was entirely unsuited to the existential racial war envisioned by Hitler. The apolitical focus on defeating the enemy's army in a decisive battle and thus setting the stage for a favorable peace to be imposed was incongruence with a war of extermination. As such, the operational art that permeated every level of the leadership culture of the German Army, aimed at such aggressive and decisive action was seen by Hitler as counterproductive towards the economic and grand strategic objectives his racial-darwinist views privileged. The goals that Hitler sought to accomplish were not possible under the operational concepts of the German Army, as no tactical victory could induce concession to the fanatically extreme goals of Nazi ideology. Hitler was aware of this, however the German Army in many ways deliberately blinded themselves to this impossibility, through the abandonment of strategy and refusal to engage with the political objectives sought.

## Soviet Operational Art

Soviet theorists developed the concept of operational art through the process of reckoning with the relative immobility that had characterized the First World War on the Western Front. The nature of the Russian Civil War as a conflict that emphasized maneuver warfare further gave Soviet thinkers recent experiences that highlighted the operational level of war. Thus, the operational level was seen as a crucial element in developing a way of war that could avert the stalemate that occurred in the West. This was further viewed in the Soviet formulation as an ideological-political development, a progression in Marxist terms from “imperialist war” which the First World War was understood as to the “class war” that the Russian Revolution was understood as. Soviet Operational Art viewed the developments of the World War and the interwar as constituting a fundamental break in previous precepts of operations. Isserson attributes this development to the addition of the dimension of time and space to combat. Whereas battles in even the Napoleonic era took place at a specific point and specific time, industrialized warfare and unprecedented mobilization led to battles spanning time and space. In the Soviet view, it is these factors, brought about by the industrialization of war that led to the development of the operational level of war and the necessity of operational art. The Eastern Front of WWI had also been far more mobile than the West.

This was a fact attributable not only to the vast distances involved but also the poor state of the Tsarist military and industry that could not field enough firepower to create the dense defenses that made offensives in the West inconclusive. Further, the Soviets viewed the inconclusivity of battles in the First World War as evidence of “the highest manifestation of the dead end at which military art had arrived during the epoch of imperialism.” This view meant that the study of operations itself was considered a Soviet development and therefore a form of socialist progress and its study a point of ideological pride. As a result, Soviet military thought focused strongly on the development of operational art and the relevant industrial capabilities throughout the 1920s and ‘30s.

Soviet planning and ideology by the late 1920’s anticipated rapid industrialization and military expansion which would rapidly bring the Soviets up to speed and (theoretically) past their western counterparts, enabling Soviet forces to stand man for man and pound for pound against the modern militaries of capitalist powers. For this reason, Soviet thinkers engaged with the same problems that many Western thinkers did under the assumption that the Soviet Union’s next war would involve firepower at the magnitude and density of the Western Front. To this task Soviet thinkers applied the lessons of the Russian Civil War and the Soviet-Polish War, which manifested in the concept of “successive battle”<sup>115</sup> whereby thinkers including Kamenev and Tukhachevsky declared it impossible to achieve strategic success through a single tactical victory, instead necessitating multiple coordinated victories to achieve a strategic objective. The coordination of these battles became the concept of operations. The focus on operations in succession can be considered a uniquely Soviet character of operational art.

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<sup>115</sup> Glantz, 21

Svechin in *Strategy* defined operational art as follows: “we call the operation that act of war, during which struggling forces without interruption are directed into a distinct region of the theater of military operations to achieve distinct intermediate aims.” More succinctly, Glantz quotes Svechin “tactics makes the steps from which operational leaps are assembled; strategy points out the path.”<sup>116</sup> This demonstrates the clear conceptions possessed by the Soviet thinkers as to the definitions of relations between tactics, operations, and strategy. The language used also indicates a reformulation of Clausewitz’s definition of strategy. This adoption is based on Clausewitz’s adoption into the communist canon through Lenin’s favor and made easier through Clausewitz’s use of Hegelian dialectic in *On War*. To illustrate the connection, Isserson cites the following to support his theories “From a study of Clausewitz, Comrade Lenin wrote: “From new phenomena in the field of military art, only the most insignificant part must be ascribed to new inventions and new ideas; the majority is ascribed to new social principles and new social conditions.”<sup>117</sup> Soviet military theory was underpinned by a Leninist reading of Clausewitz that understood the operational level of war as a consequence of the transition from imperialist wars to class wars and as a means of resolving the contradictions of imperialist industrialized war that had resulted in the quagmire and mass slaughter of the First World War.

The Soviet conception of the next war was Janus like, in that the Soviet ideology both predicted protracted class and revolutionary wars and swift, decisive victories enabled by mechanized war.<sup>118</sup> The Soviet prophecy of mechanized war was part technical and part ideological. Soviet mechanization proponents followed lines of

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<sup>116</sup> Glantz, *In Pursuit of Deep Battle*,

<sup>117</sup> Isserson, “The Evolution of Operational Art” 53

<sup>118</sup> Svechin, “Strategy and Operational Art,” 6

thinking parallel to that of Western armored “prophets” such as Lutz, Guderian, Fuller, and Hart and thus advocated for mechanized warfare on the basis that it was the technically superior form. However, the Soviet mechanization also proceeded on an ideological basis. Mechanized war was presented as a futurist triumph of socialist science, a means by which the efforts of workers in factories could be united with the victory in revolutionary war. The Soviet understanding of Marxism as scientific meant that the scientific aspect of mechanized warfare was exalted as evidence of the achievements of Marxism. Mechanized warfare was also politically expedient within the Soviet Union as it was congruent with Stalin’s policy of the expansion of heavy industry. In several years, Soviet factories produced more tanks than the Red Army had requested, forcing adjustments in doctrine to the proliferation of armor.<sup>119</sup>

While mass mechanization and a massive air force promised to drastically increase the tempo of operations, the Soviets nevertheless viewed future war as an existential struggle, a total, revolutionary class war between the working class and imperialist states. This concept had its lineage in the Trotsky-esque theories of Frunze that assumed a rising of the proletariat in a war between a capitalist and socialist state. However, it was to a large extent inherent in Marxist dogma in that the advance of socialism was inevitable and would occur through violent revolution. This conception meant that even under the policy of “socialism in one country” the Soviet Union was nevertheless preparing for an existential struggle with the capitalist world. This hypothetical future war would be of titanic and total scale and, while operations would proceed rapidly, would not be concluded quickly, as it was predicted to end with the

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<sup>119</sup> Ring of Steel,

overthrow of the world capitalist system.<sup>120</sup> However, the existence of smaller wars in the interim before this millenarian conflict was acknowledged, and it was in these that the hope of rapid victory was fostered.

As Soviet mechanized capabilities increased and its industrial output continued to climb throughout the 1930s, the influence of Tukhachevsky and his disciples came to dominate Soviet military thought. The offensive, fast-paced wars promised by Tukhachevsky's theory of war was highly attractive to the Soviet Union with the devastation of civil war still fresh in the collective memory. Ensuring that the next war was fought on foreign soil and concluded swiftly had obvious benefits, namely reducing the economic devastation of a war. Further, the political consequences of a protracted war were well understood by the Bolsheviks, having themselves used the instability to overthrow the old regime. A lengthy war was therefore considered a dangerous prospect, especially when Stalin's paranoia created the phantom threat of counter revolution. While earlier theorists such as Frunze and Svechin presented attrition as a viable prospect to equalize the likely conventional superiority of an invader, by the 1930s Soviet military organization and industry had advanced to such a state that a strategy of annihilation was preferred to one of attrition. Isserson defines Deep Battle as "simultaneous suppression of the entire tactical depth of the enemy."<sup>121</sup> The concept of engaging the enemy in depth was born as the result of applying the lessons of the Russian civil war and the Eastern Front of WWI to the issue of the static warfare that had defined the Western Front. While the Soviet military lacked experience in the positional type of war that was practiced in the west, as the Soviets industrialized they were cognizant that with these increased

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<sup>120</sup> Stalin's Other War,

<sup>121</sup> Isserson, Harold, "Selected Readings", 29

capabilities came the consequence of the Eastern Front attaining sufficient density of force to prevent maneuver. Tukhachevsky identified breakthrough and disruption of the enemy's rear areas as the paradigm by which the stalemate could be broken. Swift exploitation of a breakthrough with motorized and mechanized forces would serve to disrupt the enemy's decision making cycle and efforts at containment. The ability of reserves carried by rail to contain almost any breakthrough would be countered through deep operations carried out by mechanized forces.

As Isserson's writing demonstrates, Soviet military professionals saw themselves within the academic and intellectual tradition of broader Europe. While there was a drive to demonstrate the superiority of socialism in this field, the fundamental bases of military thought were not rejected as bourgeois, with Isserson acknowledging the influence of Fuller in the origination of Deep Battle. The experiences of the Soviet Union in the Russian Civil War meant that the Red Army had been unable to privilege ideology over military sense, leading to Trotsky's reforms that had brought more conventional military discipline and created the conception of war as a science. Isserson refers to what the officers were undertaking as "Marxist military-scientific investigation," a phrase that illustrates the incorporation of technical military skill and knowledge, including operational art, into a scientific conception that was compatible and glorified within the Marxist-Leninist framework of the Soviet Union. Thus, unlike many other institutions within the Soviet Union, the Red Army was able to pursue its studies without them being subsumed into an ideology that in many cases demanded a clean break with the past.

Thus, while the Red Army was entirely subordinate to the political apparatus and was required to be in ideological compliance, Soviet ideology had carved out a sufficient

niche for military thought to take place without political interference. Until Stalin's purges of the military, the Red Army developed the military means of achieving the regime's political goals through utilization of its institutional freedom that resulted from the designation of war as a Marxist science. The doctrine of Deep Battle was subject to political concerns and represented a tactical-operational tool for fulfilling political aims but was therefore not unduly influenced by political authority and remained fundamentally grounded in practical and realistic concerns rather than ideological and fanatical matters.

The destruction of much of the Soviet officer corps through the Great Purge and the persecution of Tukhachevsky was responsible for the defensive elements of Deep Battle being neglected in the years before the outbreak of war. This was due to Stalin's own ideological inclinations towards the attack and the fact that the RKKA now lacked the institutional strength to develop defensive plans and training under its own initiative. The neglect of the defensive was so extreme, that the Soviets practically had to relearn the art of defense in 1941.<sup>122</sup> Thus, the total power that the political authority held over the military prevented the exercise of the military's technical functions that were not in full ideological compliance with the political authority. The terror that the purges created within the officer corps constrained the Soviet military's ability to function of a technical level. No longer was the greatest threat enemy action and therefore the greatest concern was not combat efficacy but rather avoiding being deemed politically unreliable. The situation created by Stalin's purges emphasized political adherence rather than technical

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<sup>122</sup> Glantz,

proficiency, leaving the Red Army ill-prepared and ultimately ineffective at enacting Stalin's political agenda.<sup>123</sup>

In the way, Soviet operational art developed a similar focus on the idea of battles of annihilation through mechanized-combined-arms war as the Germans did. However, the political-strategic contexts for the operational arts lead to drastic differences in their nature and purposes. The German way of war understood the battle of annihilation as an end in and of itself through which a radical altering of the political situation was effected, setting the stage for either another offensive or for peace. By contrast, the Soviets, with the view of class wars that were existential and protracted in nature, viewed battles of annihilation as a tool in a campaign to be used in succession to destroy the ability of the enemy to resist the revolutionary army. Isserson in 1938 writes, "Future war with its decisive aims will force each side to exhaust all its forces and capabilities to the end. The struggle will not be resolved with a single lightning blow. Frunze indicated this very soberly. He said, '...when the matter comes to a serious encounter, then it can hardly be concluded in a short interval of time by the delivery of a single annihilating blow.'"<sup>124</sup> It was on this basis that Tukhachevsky's concept of "Deep Battle" had been created, with the understanding that the existential nature of future war required engaging the enemy in his strategic depth. While Tukhachevsky fell victim to Stalin's purges, enough officers, including Georgy Zhukov, were educated in his school to revive it following the German invasion. In this way the specific political purpose that underwrote the operational art of the Red Army distinguished it greatly from the operational art of the German Army, which explicitly rejected a political goal and sought to concern itself with what was

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<sup>123</sup> Glantz, *The Red Army on the*

<sup>124</sup> Isserson, "Operational Prospects for the Future" in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 81

strictly military through focusing on a singular battle of annihilation and neglecting strategy.

## The War

### Impact of Ideology - Totalitarianism on the Battlefield

#### The Nazification of the *Heer*

The German way of war, based in German's geostrategic situation, with hostile neighbors and lacking geographic features to secure its borders aimed at short decisive wars whereby a positive peace may be made within weeks as exemplified by the wars of German unification and was entirely incompatible with Nazi political-ideological objectives. Moltke's formula was seeking the total defeat of the enemy thereby creating a situation in which the defeated party was willing to accept all political concessions the politicians could desire and thereby decoupling the process of prosecuting war from its political objectives. The all-consuming fanaticism of Nazi ideology rejected this division and sought to impose its own formula of war on the army.<sup>125</sup> The "total war" envisioned by traditional German theorists focused on the mobilization of society for the decisive

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<sup>125</sup> See, David Stahel, "The Wehrmacht and National Socialist Military Thinking," *War in History* 24, no. 3 (2017): 336–61.

blow in a swift war. By contrast, the “total war” envisioned by the Nazis (and certain radical militarist thinkers such as Ludendorff) could more aptly be termed “perpetual war” as the racial conflict Nazi ideology envisioned was considered to be Darwinist and therefore unending.<sup>126</sup> Hitler said to General Alfred Jodl “The upcoming campaign is more than a mere contest of arms. It will be a struggle between two world views.”<sup>127</sup> Nazi ideology thus presented a major challenge for the planners of Operation BARBAROSSA in that quick victory was inherently impossible with the political objectives involved. No matter how effective the operation was, the political objective of genocide meant that military victory could not be turned into a political settlement. Effectively, the extremity of Nazi political aims meant that regardless of how operationally successful the German Army was, the strategic goal required something far beyond its means. The traditional formula of inflicting crushing defeats through the desired battles of encirclement played out in the invasion of the Soviet Union, however, unlike in the Austro-Prussian War, Franco-Prussian War, or the Battle of France, no political settlement was made. The political goals of the Nazis were too extreme to be accepted no matter the military gains made by German forces. Thus, the German Army utilized a way of war designed for extracting policy concessions in conjunction with the Nazi policy of racialized struggle. As a result of this ideological inconsistency, friction developed between the military means and the political ends, with German operations frequently achieving results that would be decisive had they been fighting a traditional war, but strategically insignificant compared with the objectives sought.

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<sup>126</sup> Richard Weikart, “The Role of Darwinism in Nazi Racial Thought,” *German Studies Review* 36, no. 3 (2013): 537–56.

<sup>127</sup> Jürgen Förster, *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol 4, *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1983)

Hitler and the Nazis resolution to this was to demand that the German Army wage a fundamentally political form of war. The Nazi agenda required the armed forces to act as fanatic executors of Nazi ideology. This concept was starkly at odds with the traditional conception of the German military as an institution independent of policy, particularly in the Moltkean sense, in which the question of how a war was to be waged was exclusively in the hands of the military. Thus, while some Germans objected to or resisted the Nazi agenda for moral reasons, the Nazis primarily encountered significant resistance as a result of jealously guarded institutional independence and strongly cleaved-to traditions. It must be emphasized that this resistance did not manifest through opposition to Nazi aims or active resistance to the genocidal aims of the Nazis. Many officers simply felt that the Nazi party had no business telling the exalted Prusso-German officer corps how to conduct a war. The Nazi party tenet of the total politicization of society had run afoul of the Moltkean sentiment that had not only endured from 1870, but found its zenith in the military dictatorship of Ludendorff and Hindenburg. Thus, in seeking to impose the Nazi conception of war, these efforts were circumvented or disregarded by many officers who instead sought to wage war congruent to the traditional German way of war.

Under the conservative Moltkean view, the strategic objective was the total destruction of the enemy's military forces and capacity to resist, rendering them entirely helpless and therefore willing to accept whatever peace terms may be imposed by the civilian government. This view delineates a clear line between war and peace, with the army's responsibility starting with the declaration of war and ending with the total reduction of the enemy's capacity to resist. While under this view the army's authority

remained absolute within these bounds, the question of what the political demands upon the defeated are to be does not inform strategy and thus does not affect operations. This is directly contrasted with the Nazi tenet of the total politicization of society and the view of war as a continuation of the racial struggle of Nazi ideology. In this manner, even as German officers may have accepted the precepts of Nazi ideology such as German racial superiority, officers frequently proved unwilling to conduct operations with the strategic goals of the Nazi party in mind. The institutional culture of the German Army encouraged the dogmatic pursuit of total military victory and the prevention of political interference in achieving this goal. In this manner, even ideologically sympathetic officers deviated from the Nazi line by failing to substitute the traditional strategic objective with the Nazi objective of racial war. To reiterate, the matter of fact was not that these individuals objected to the notion of racial war, but instead disagreed with the Nazi idea that a racial war needed to be conducted in a different manner than a conventional one. The conservative military thinker's view was that the Moltkean strategic objective of rendering the enemy militarily helpless was as suitable for implementing the Nazi program as it was imposing any other political concession.

The Nazis correctly identified this attitude as problematic. The extreme nature of the war and extreme nature of the demands meant that a Moltkean approach could not be effective. As the Nazis sought the destruction and enslavement of the Slavic race, they understood clearly that they could expect no capitulation from the Soviet Union. The Nazis understood the war in ideological terms as a death struggle between nations and races. In such a struggle, it was impossible to attain a tactical victory of sufficient magnitude to lead to a political solution. Particularly crucial is the lack of distinction

between war and peace in Nazi ideology. The conception of racial struggle espoused by the Nazis was viewed as continual regardless of the diplomatic situation. Thus, the sharp distinction between war and peace that underpinned the Moltkean idea of both civil-military relations and war was incompatible with the Nazi view. Thus, the methods used by the army, acting under a Moltkean paradigm, that sought to win a peace was unsatisfactory for the Nazi leadership for whom ideological concerns dominated and propelled towards a fanatical perpetual war.

The incongruity of approaches intensified the existing cultural and social conflict between the traditionalist army and the Nazi party. The contempt held by the army towards the intrusion of political (or ideological concerns) fed the preexisting antipathy Hitler held towards the old-officer class that had for so long scorned the Nazis as fanatical thugs. This personal hatred combined with the sharply different conceptions of the role of the political in war, resulted in attempts by Nazi leadership to instill its own values and views into the institution of the army. The establishment of OKW and Hitler's seizure of the role of commander-in-chief constituted a heavy-handed method towards establishing this congruency. The introduction of Nazi control applied a stifling effect to German military thinking, not dissimilar to that of the increased political control effected by Stalin on the Red Army.<sup>128</sup> While the defeats suffered by the Red Army forced Stalin to walk back his smothering politicization, German defeats were seen by Hitler as a consequence of insufficient politicization. The actual resistance in the German Army to waging war in accordance with Nazi ideology fed this view, with Hitler dismissing conventional military knowledge as outmoded in the new, revolutionary-ideological war

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<sup>128</sup> Geoffrey P. Megargee, "Triumph of the Null: Structure and Conflict in the Command of German Land Forces, 1939–1945," *War in History* 4, no. 1 (1997): 60–80.

that Nazism was waging. The genuine presence of resistance to Nazi ideas meant that setbacks could be rationalized as the result of an insufficiently zealous application of Nazi ideology in a manner that was not possible with the Red Army, which from its origins was a Bolshevik institution and had any measure of independence destroyed by 1941.

The planning for Operation BARBAROSSA exemplified the detrimental nature of the strategic asynchronicity between the army and political leadership. Nazi ideological objectives caused immediate conflict over what the center of gravity of the operation ought to be. In *On War*, Clausewitz writes: “If the enemy is to be coerced you must put him in a situation that is even more unpleasant than the sacrifice you call on him to make.”<sup>129</sup> This very basic logical assertion by Clausewitz is one that placed the Germans in a strategic bind. The “sacrifice” the Germans sought was the ethnic cleansing and colonization of the nations of the Soviet Union and such a fanatically destructive peace was not one that any enemy would accept. The objective of the literal destruction of the peoples of the Soviet Union was not internalized by the General Staff or its chief, Franz Halder. While Hitler desired the operation to focus on the acquisition of territory and resources for the purposes of a protracted war (mostly with the western powers) Halder and the General Staff believed the operation should focus on the destruction of any many Soviet formations as possible, exhibiting the traditional disregard for political objectives. Halder was overruled, with numerous alterations made to the operational plans for BARBAROSSA at Hitler’s insistence to acquire grain from Ukraine and press towards the Caucasian oil fields, planning not for a swift victory but a protracted war in which economic factors would be decisive. While Halder and the General Staff desired to

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<sup>129</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, 78

induce Soviet collapse through the encirclement and destruction of the Red Army followed by a drive on Moscow, Hitler insisted on an economic focus. With the loss of status of OKH and the General Staff to the parallel branches of the Luftwaffe and OKH, Halder did not have the confidence to confront Hitler, instead hoping to modify the plan as it was in motion and naively believing Hitler would not object when the time came.

The end result was that Operation BARBAROSSA constituted a discordant compromise and possessed no clear center of gravity.<sup>130</sup> As Heinz Guderian writes in his memoirs “Three army groups, each of approximately the same strength, were to attack with diverging objectives; no single clear operational objective seemed to be there. Seen from a professional perspective, this did not at all appear promising.”<sup>131</sup> This critical assessment with the benefit of hindsight is in marked contrast with the opinions of leaders at the time. As Gross writes, “General Marcks estimated a required time of nine to seventeen weeks for the entire campaign. With the attack starting in early summer, Halder expected it to end by autumn 1941-after approximately eight to ten weeks. Hitler assumed up to twenty-one weeks. Many foreign observers agreed with the German assessments.”<sup>132</sup> This shockingly *blasé* attitude towards starting what was to be the largest and most brutal war in history is further revealed in the diary entry from 16 June 1941 of Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels who wrote “They [the Soviets] have available about 180 to 200 divisions, maybe a little less, approximately as many as we have. They are absolutely not comparable to us in terms of personnel and material quality. The thrust will take place at several places initially. They will simply be rolled up. The Führer estimates about four months for the action; I estimate much less. Bolshevism will

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<sup>130</sup> Gross, *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 211.

<sup>131</sup> Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 142

<sup>132</sup> Gross, 212

collapse like a house of cards. We face an unprecedented triumph. We must act.”<sup>133</sup> The Germans thus entered the war with a profound arrogance as to their own competence based in racist assumptions, the dramatic victories over France and Poland, and the Soviets’ own poor performance against Poland in 1920 and Finland in 1940. The overestimation of the Russians in the First World War and their ultimate collapse had led to a stereotyping of Russia as militarily incompetent and politically unstable. The social darwinist and racial historicist component not only in Nazism but within mainstream German chauvinist nationalism that much of the German Army subscribed to led to an in many ways careless approach to planning war with the Soviet Union where the failure to integrate the operational and political was not considered to be a decisive factor.

As exhibited by the planning for Operation BARBAROSSA, while operational plans were made with explicitly racist assumptions regarding military competency, they were not made in congruence with the ideology of racial struggle espoused by the Nazis until Hitler began to take greater personal control over the military. The failure of BARBAROSSA to cause a Soviet collapse was seen by Hitler as clear evidence of the need for the Nazification of the army. Hitler sought to resolve the fundamental contradiction between German political aims and strategy and the operational art that was applied to seek them through increased personal control of the army. Following the failure to capture Moscow, Hitler relieved Brauchitsch and took over personal management of the army. As Hitler took increasingly direct control over the army and appointed commanders that shared his views or sought to fulfill his wishes, the traditional view of strategy as an apolitical seeking of annihilation was eroded and supplanted with

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<sup>133</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Tagebücher 1924-1945*, vol. 4, 1940-1942, ed. Ralf Georg Reuth (Munich 1992), 1601, entry 16 June 1941.

Nazi objectives. From a military perspective, this was politicization was not inherently detrimental, as operations ought to be informed by the political objectives of the regime the military serves. However, Hitler enforced not only political objectives, but also his own theory of operations, replacing officers that were not compatible with his conceptions that were entirely alien to any form of technical military sense. Hitler's own views, developed based on intuition, amateur study, and experience as a corporal in the First World War were antithetical to the traditional German way of war, resulting in a collapse of the operational art that functioned under assumptions incompatible with Hitler's theories and Nazism in general. From 1942 onwards, Hitler insisted on managing all defensive battles personally.<sup>134</sup> Hitler, lacking the ability or inclination to develop a sophisticated theory of operations replaced operational direction with crude ideological concepts through his micromanagement and appointment of those who would "work towards the Führer."<sup>135</sup> In this manner, the traditional operational and strategic conceptions of Heer-along with its relationship to political authority-were willfully destroyed by Hitler and replaced by a strategy based in Nazi racial-destiny and an operational art based in little more than Hitler's convictions in his own genius. In seeking to bring the German Army into alignment with the political-ideological objectives he sought, Hitler to some extent managed to do so but destroyed the technical ability of German officers to efficaciously conduct operations and thus actually accomplish the political objectives he sought. +

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<sup>134</sup> Gross,

<sup>135</sup> Kershaw,

## Recovering from the Great Purge

As Glantz recounts in his work *Stumbling Colossus* the Red Army on the eve of war was a force undergoing massive rapid changes as its ranks expanded and Stalin sought to moderate the effect his purges had produced in destroying the efficacy of the Red Army in terms of morale and leadership. This reorganization was far from completed at the time of war and as a result, the Red Army entered the war without a cohesive doctrine and was forced to undertake its desperately needed reforms even as it bled to hold off the largest invasion in history. The lively debate regarding operational and strategic theory that the Red Army had undertaken during the interwar had been between Svechin's school of defensive attrition, and Tukhachevsky's more offensively minded mechanized school of annihilation. Tukhachevsky's futurism was more appealing and was thus adopted, but his death in the purges of 1937 left his work politically tainted. Glantz writes, "As a result, the Soviet Union approached war in 1941 armed with neither Svechin's nor Tukhachevsky's strategic vision. The ensuing strategic vacuum would exact a terrible toll on the armed forces and the state."<sup>136</sup> In this manner, the internal politics of the Soviet Union had acted in a manner directly detrimental to its military capabilities.

However, following humiliation in the Winter War, the Soviet Union was able to begin to curb its ideological tendencies in favor of practicality, once again subordinating political commissars to field officers and increasing the authority of officers over the men they commanded.<sup>137</sup> This willingness to compromise on the ideological purity on Stalin's part became even more apparent upon the outbreak of war. Stalin's first radio address

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<sup>136</sup> Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 83

<sup>137</sup> Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 23

urged resistance to the invader through appeals to Russian nationalism, a decided anti-soviet concept, but one tremendously powerful at inspiring resistance to the enemy from those who may not be fully indoctrinated in the Soviet mode of thinking. Even as this occurred, however, Stalin had once again given political officers parallel authority to military officers, increasing confusion and command paralysis.<sup>138</sup> The invasion brought about practical compromise, but also a strengthening of the ideological terror that had been walked back since the Winter War, but had never truly left. In this manner, Soviet ideology mixed with Stalin's paranoia to constitute a wave of brutality towards anyone suspected of disloyalty or failure. The Bolshevik psychosis of the "wrecker" and the "saboteur" that was blamed whenever socialist endeavors failed to meet their goals was extended to the army and with the tremendous reverses suffered across the front became a brutal myth.

However, *Stavka* nevertheless demonstrated considerable unity of purpose and clarity of strategic vision, in marked contrast to that factional struggles of the Germans, in its reaction and reform following the invasion. The massive losses necessitated technical changes to the operational structure of the Red Army, with measures such as the abolition of the corps as a unit were undertaken without objection from Stalin or without his interference. As Stalin had purged the military of anyone he had considered remotely unreliable, the army, particularly in that time of crisis, at least at the senior level was able to act with Stalin's trust. This is in stark contrast to the enduring antipathy between Hitler and OKH that prevented even deeply necessary operational actions from being taken. The ideological puritanism that would come to paralyze the German Army without orders from the Führer would be sacrificed by Stalin and the *Stavka* as the war progressed. The

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 63

latent ethno-nationalism that had been paved over by Bolshevik rhetoric was excavated and embraced as a true-unifier. “Communist ideology was, in large measure, supplanted by patriotism and by the daily demands of the struggle.” By contrast, for the Germans late in the war, “*Führungsoffiziers*, the Nazi equivalent of political commissars, began to appear in German headquarters, and commanders who suffered defeat for any reason were lucky to escape with their lives.”<sup>139</sup> The lack of institutional conflict between Stalin and *Stavka* was fundamental to this development. With leadership purged, those who remained were invested with enough trust to fulfill their technical functions and had sufficient rapport with Stalin not to be viewed as threats.

The totality of Soviet ideology in society allowed for a degree of ideological flexibility from security that was absent in the Nazi case. As Hitler sought to transform German society into his vision even as war progressed, Soviet society had been transformed by ideology for two decades at the outbreak of war. In this way, Soviet leadership could not argue for an intensification of ideology as the remedy for the military disasters suffered as society was fully Bolshevized. By contrast, the Nazis had not had decades of total political control to reshape German society in accordance with ideology and as a result saw setbacks as opportunities to advance the ideological program and erode the interests of traditional German society that was not yet in Nazi hands. Thus, Soviet leadership was unable to suggest increased ideological adherence as a consequence was forced to take a more pragmatic view of resolving the dire situation the German invasion had placed the country in.

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<sup>139</sup> Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus*, 288

## Effects of the Dictators - Hitler and Stalin as commander-in-chief

### Hitler - The Omnipotent Corporal

While Hitler never attempted to purge the officer corps of all those who were not ideologically compliant, he proved to be a micromanager in chief, particularly as the war progressed. His early successes convinced him of his own genius as a commander which justified his subsequent removal of generals that did not subscribe to his own ideological view of war. Following the victories over France and Poland, OKW went so far as to block the publication of a study that emphasized the intellectual contributions of Schlieffen and Seeckt to the triumph in order to feed the myth of Hitler's genius.<sup>140</sup> As the war turned against Germany, Hitler increasingly began to interfere and micromanage, replacing generals at his convenience in part based on his own myth.

Hitler, lacking an officer's education, stood outside the intellectual tradition of the German military. He gained credibility as commander-in-chief through the Anschluss, the Munich Agreement, and gambling on the ultimately successful "sickle cut" in the Battle of France. However, these decisions were primarily strategic-political. While the sickle cut was an operational matter, it had strategic implications by offering a more audacious alternative that would entail a shorter war if successful. These successes fed the Führer myth and meshed well with the German understanding that placed a idolized the intangible and unlearnable quality of military genius that led to many traditionally

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<sup>140</sup> Gross, 191

educated officers in OKH to become wrapped up in the Führer cult and thus did not resist Hitler's increasing intrusions. "Because of his early successes, many General Staff officers, who in the course of their training had been indoctrinated repeatedly with the concept of the intuitive rather than the rationally definable capabilities of the military commander, came to accept the notion that Hitler had been "anointed by Samuel," so to speak, and was therefore a genuine "natural talent."<sup>141</sup>

However, it is vital not to overstate the role of Hitler's interference in Germany's military fortunes. Many post-war German accounts found it convenient to shift blame to Hitler because, as Citino puts it, "he was dead and he was Hitler."<sup>142</sup> This version of events fails to account for the operational and strategic mistakes made by the German officers and further neglects the willing and sometimes zealous participation of the Heer in the Nazi agenda. From the participation of so many officers in the Führer cult, to the many young officers who joined OKW and sought to bring the "antiquated" general staff to heel behind Nazi aims, to the reluctance to challenge Hitler in any coordinated manner regarding his operational interference or lack of strategic focus, army leadership on every level in general either tacitly or actively advanced the Nazi agenda and participated in the Nazification of the *Heer*.

Further, the army cannot be exonerated in terms of Germany's operational and strategic failures. For example, the planning of Operation BARBAROSSA, the Wehrmacht's most obvious failure, was entirely within the hands of OKH, the bastion of traditional German military thought. This failure exposed the limits of the German operational thinking. Faced with an enemy that did not capitulate or disintegrate despite

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<sup>141</sup> Gross, 241

<sup>142</sup> Citino,

battles of annihilation, the traditional German way of war was patently insufficient. A way of war based on gaining a swift, dramatic battlefield victory that would form the basis for a favorable peace was ill-suited for the war of racial annihilation that Hitler had in mind. Hitler's intervention in the operational planning may have had operational implications, but OKH had no solution to the strategic problem that Nazi fanaticism had created for Germany as it had abrogated strategic responsibility.

The failure of OKH in the execution of BARBAROSSA confirmed to Hitler what he already knew, namely that he understood war better than the stuffy officers of the General Staff. As previously discussed, Hitler was not entirely wrong in his assessment. The ideological totality demanded by Nazi ideology was incompatible with the apolitical culture of the German officer corps and this was a fact plainly apparent to Hitler as a fanatic. . Hitler could further see plainly that the German way of war was not appropriate for waging the kind of radical war his ideology demanded. While Hitler was successful in identifying the lack of political consideration in German operational art as a serious (and perhaps fatal) defect, his remedy was typical of his personality. Drawing upon his fanaticism, his experiences in WWI, and half-baked conceptions based on informal study of war, Hitler devised his own "operational art" for the Eastern Front. Simplistic, and far more strategic-politically oriented than the traditional tactical-operational oriented doctrine, Hitler imposed this through the replacement of generals that would not conform and through Führer directives. An example of this is Führer Order 26, issued in December of 1941 mandating that officers on the Eastern Front fight defensively explicitly in the outdated linear defense of the early First World War. "I am purposefully returning...to this type of defense, as it was successfully practiced in the hard defensive

battles of World War I, especially up to the end of 1916.”<sup>143</sup> This prohibition on basic concepts of depth in depth that had become the standard even during the First World War was a dramatic intrusion of the political into the tactical level of war, with the idea of standing and fighting codified as the only ideological acceptable for the defense. Hitler utilized his boundless authority to impose his own armchair-general views onto the conduct of war, deliberately destroying the conventional expertise that the vaunted German Army had cultivated from its inception and throughout the interwar. Hitler’s strategy was informed first and foremost by ideology and only secondarily by reality. This was the most frequent source of friction with his generals. Nazi ideology placed a premium on objectives that did not correspond with military logic. For this reason, ceding territory for tactical or operational advantage was invariably opposed by Hitler even in the face of absolute necessity. Nazi ideology privileged the possession of land as the fundamental arbiter of racial destiny. Thus, Hitler’s strategy, informed by his political/ideological views, curtailed German operational art and crudely forced it into compliance through the elevation of “stand and fight” generals who would utilize a static, linear defense. Throughout the war, Hitler continued to issue orders to “stand fast” and designate cities as “fortress cities” with increasingly little effect on reality. Kershaw’s concept of “working towards the Führer” takes on a military context, where even commanders not appointed by Hitler sought to act in accordance with his views and those of their superiors whom Hitler had appointed.

Hitler’s heedless imposition of his own views resolved the contradiction between German strategy (and political objectives) and operational art in a tremendously

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<sup>143</sup> Führer Order 26 December 1941, printed in *Wehrmacht High Command War Diary* (KTB OKW), vol. 1, part 1, doc. 113, page 1086f.

destructive method. Hitler fundamentally lacked the military acumen to develop a sound alternative to the German way of war. His purely ideological alternative ignored the tactical, operational, and strategic realities that constitute the technical-scientific aspect of war and sought to replace them with fanaticism. Techniques such as an operational mobile defense (for example Manstein's backhand blow) or even the tactical method of defense in depth were prohibited despite the fact that these were technically superior methods of achieving the same purpose as Hitler's "stand fast" orders. Either as a result of ignorance of this technical military knowledge or as a product of his blind faith in the ability of fanaticism to produce victory, Hitler proved unwilling or unable to integrate the realities of waging war and thus served to degrade the operational capabilities of the German Army as the war progressed and Hitler's mode of thinking proliferated. As Glantz writes, "Although this interference has been exaggerated as a kind of universal German alibi for any defeat, it is true that the German forces gradually lost the flexibility and subordinate initiative that had made them so successful. A few brilliant commanders were permitted to make their own decisions as late as 1945, but, if they failed, they were soon replaced by men too timid to even request the authority to maneuver."<sup>144</sup>

Hitler further simply lacked an understanding of operational conduct. This fact combined with his conviction in his own military brilliance led to a tremendously counterproductive form of micromanagement. The sheer derision Hitler showed towards the generals of the Heer is outright shocking in terms of arrogance. Upon dismissing Walther von Brauchitsch from his post of Supreme-Commander of the Army in order to take personal command following the failed drive on Moscow, Hitler remarked "Everyone can do this bit of operational conduct." He further justifies his action by

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<sup>144</sup> Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 287-288

stating “The task of the army commander-in-chief is to educate the army in a National Socialist perspective. I do not know any army general who could perform this task as I would wish it. That is why I have decided to assume command of the army myself.”<sup>145</sup> It is in this manner that Hitler’s personal fanaticism becomes a decisive factor in the conduct of operations. As demonstrated by his statement, Hitler’s understanding of war was that the path to victory was blind faith in the political ideology, with the right-ness of the ideology leading inherently to victory. This conception was buoyed by the early successes of Germany, accomplishing what even German military experts had considered impossible in the Battle of France. As evidenced by his ideologically focused approach to the role of commander-in-chief, Hitler attributed these dramatic successes to Nazi ideology, rather than any tactical innovations or particular operational concepts. The undue faith in ideology was something the Soviets could not share, as the sharp reverses of the Winter War and Operation BARBAROSSA demonstrated. While ideology and even fanaticism played a large role in Soviet military thought, unlike the Germans, Soviet leadership was from the beginning aware that technical competence was an utterly decisive factor and ideological adherence alone could not assure victory. In this manner, Hitler’s views had led to the devouring of German leadership ability, with talented commanders relieved and replaced by those who were content to await Hitler’s personal approval for taking action. The imposition of the strategic-political on the German Army had been accompanied by an utter destruction of the operation-political.

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<sup>145</sup> Gross, 241

## Stalin - The Compromises of Necessity

While Soviet ideology was not less radical nor more all-consuming than Nazism, the apparent urgency of the military situation combined with the understanding of war as a science to be understood well or poorly, with the Bolsheviks making no claims to an ideological way of war allowed for radical adaptation towards pragmatism. While Nazi fanaticism fed a Führer cult that privileged Hitler's egomania over military efficiency, Stalin, while paranoid, was far more capable of developing cooperative relationships with his generals. By 1941 Soviet high command were men hand-picked by Stalin, among the few to have made it unscathed through the purges. The army, attacked during the process of transition, was considered largely reliable with the terror that had led to disaster in the Winter War drastically moderated. From no quarter of the Soviet government was there anything resembling a threat to be addressed through an intensification of ideology.

However, the lack of a material threat was no impediment to Stalin's paranoia. Even as the Red Army was nearly disintegrating during the German onslaught, the NKVD was executing soldiers that had escaped encirclement. As Glantz writes "This renewal of Communist Party influence and terror in the army was unnecessary, since virtually all soldiers were doing their utmost without such threats."<sup>146</sup> Stalin himself, after his initial disappearance following the invasion, immediately set about micromanaging the conduct of the war and delegating little to his subordinates. Stalin proved a more apt generalissimo than Hitler did. To some extent this can be attributed to personality, Stalin was by no means as antisocial as Hitler and was capable of developing personal connections with people.<sup>147</sup> Further, however, was the fact that Stalin had actual

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<sup>146</sup> Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 64

<sup>147</sup> Montefiore, *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar*,

command experience during the Russian Civil War and had worked as an organizer in the Bolshevik Party. Whereas Hitler leveraged his talents as a speaker and manipulator to head a movement that did the work to bring him to power (and thus lacked the work ethic to fulfill the role of dictator in an efficacious manner) Stalin had operated as a revolutionary before his own efforts as an organizer had brought him victory in the struggle for leadership of the Soviet Union.<sup>148</sup> In this manner, Stalin, while possessing traits detrimental to the role of commander-in-chief such as a tendency to micromanage, nevertheless had greater practical experience in commanding effectively as well as finding subordinates that were both competent and sufficiently nonthreatening.

Even as Stalin micromanaged operational and defensive measures in 1941, he did so in coordination with *Stavka*, rather than acting in opposition to his General Staff as Hitler so often did.<sup>149</sup> The lack of institutional conflict and personal resentment between the commander-in-chief and operational planning authorities allowed for Stalin's micromanagements to at the very least be carried out in the manner intended. This relationship developed trust between Stalin and his subordinates, with Zhukov able to convince Stalin of the necessity of acts such as maintaining Ivan Konev as Zhukov's deputy or conducting spoiling attacks in front of Moscow. Even as Stalin proved himself to be micromanager in chief he nevertheless placed sufficient weight on Zhukov's professional opinion to acquiesce to many circumstances. In fact, even in 1941 Stalin had developed a habit of assigning Zhukov to the areas in deepest crisis. This type of trust and delegation was only possible because neither Stalin nor Zhukov had any illusions about the superior-subordinate relationship. The Red Army had no pretensions of

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<sup>148</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris*

<sup>149</sup> Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 82

independence and did not look down on the Bolshevik party. The same could not be said of the German Army and the Nazi party. The absence of what was a petty, factionalist, and cultural conflict between the army and state was a fundamental factor in understanding the ability of Stalin to work cooperatively with his subordinates in contrast to Hitler.

While Stalin enjoyed a far less conflictual relationship with his subordinates from the beginning, it still took until 1943 to develop the trust needed to delegate appropriately to the talented military professionally the Soviet Union had at its disposal. Stalin had entered the war with a military in a far worse state than Hitler had but through the growth of trust between the generalissimo and his subordinates had increased the effectiveness of the Red Army leadership just as Hitler was in savaging the German officer corps through Führer directives that limited tactical and operational action and relieving commanders who challenged his baseless military assertions. In this manner, as the German Army began weaker and increasingly intellectually bankrupt as talent officers were replaced by fanatical loyalists, the Red Army was developing as a professional organization with officers given the autonomy needed to utilize their expertise. As Hitler was issuing orders demanding German officers do their best to emulate the defensive methods of 1916, “On 9 October 1942, at the height of the Stalingrad defense, a decree restored unitary command and reduced military commissars to the ranks of deputy commander for political affairs.”<sup>150</sup> This fundamental step is representative of the inverse trends of increased autonomy on the part of the Red Army and increased centralization and politicization on the part of the German Army. Stalin’s increased trust in his subordinates and the Red Army as an institution allowed for its growth both in terms of military

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<sup>150</sup> Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 156

experience and in terms of operational art. As Glantz writes “By mid-1942 Stalin had come to trust his commanders and staff officers as professional leaders, and they had justified this trust by learning the painful lessons of mechanized warfare.”<sup>151</sup> While Stalin had to address the problem of an army too stifled by measures implemented to ensure ideological consistency and political loyalty Hitler was faced with an army that was too independently minded to fulfill the strategic objective his ideology had set for it. In Hitler’s case, he applied ideology to such a degree that the German Army in 1945 resembled the Red Army in 1941. Whereas Stalin was able to reduce the political influence over the army to allow for talented officers to make use of their skills and achieve the victories the Soviet Union needed to survive.

The 1944 *Field Regulations of the Red Army*, or *Ustav* is illustrative of the shift in attitude from the timorous hesitation that had hamstrung Soviet leadership at every level in the early war towards the aggression and independence needed to successfully carry out maneuver warfare. “The readiness to take responsibility upon oneself for a daring decision and to carry it to the end in a persistent manner is the basis of the action of all commanders in battle.... Reproach is deserved not by the one who in his zeal to destroy the enemy does not reach his goal, but by the one who, fearing responsibility, remains inactive and does not employ at the proper moment all of his forces and means for winning victory.”<sup>152</sup> This emphasis on the independence of junior leadership to take responsibility and act aggressive echoes the traditional German precepts of warfare that had engendered so much success on the tactical and operational levels. The Red Army by

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid, 176

<sup>152</sup> *Polevoi ustav krasnoi armii 1944 (PU-44)* [Field Regulations of the Red Army, 1944] (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1944); translated by the Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G2, U.S. Army, p. 9. in Glantz, 181

1944 was able to integrate the political and ideological framework of the war with the operational aggression and independence needed to wage war on a mass scale. In this way, the Soviets developed a means of war that unified politics and operations at the same time as the Germans brought the army into political alignment but destroyed its ability to operate efficiently or independently.

## Conclusions

Ultimately, by 1945 the German Army and the Red Army had reversed roles. By that point the German Army was the one suffocated by the totalitarian state, its operational art sacrificed at the altar of political control; it was a warped reflection of the Red Army in 1941, but a reflection nonetheless. By contrast, the Red Army had not only developed tactical-operational capabilities equivalent to the Germans at their best, but had exceeded them through the development of a productive working relationship with political authority that allowed for the formulation of strategy that could inform the direction of the campaign. The question as to whether German defeat was avoidable after 1941 is impossible to answer, but it can be said without a doubt that the toxic relationship developed between politics and war hastened Germany's defeat, just as the effective synthesis of the same factors propelled the Soviets towards their triumph.

A crucial factor responsible for the divergent understandings of the relationship between war and politics developed during the war was the pre-existing relationship between civilian and military authority. The Soviet Red Army understood itself as a Bolshevik organization, in common purpose with the political decision making apparatus and understood itself as a subordinate organ. By contrast, the German Army possessed a

sense of continuity greater than that of the state it nominally served. The German Army, as a result of successive constitutional arrangements, viewed itself as equal to political authority and thus resented any intrusion of the political into its domain. The division that was enshrined in the legal division of responsibility had become mirrored in theory and institutional culture, to the point that the German Army denied the role of politics in war and indeed denied that its actions when waging war were in fact political. Despite the failure of this arrangement during the First World War, the concepts of an operation and a battle were not distinguished, nor was there any conception of a radical break from the past in terms of theory. Rather, heroic figures of Clausewitz, Moltke, and Schlieffen were elevated as exemplars. The turn towards the past and insistence that the loss in the World War was a result of flawed execution of fundamentally sound theory narrowed the introspection that was possible. As a result, the German Army entered the Second World War almost entirely out of step with its political leadership and with the neglect of the strategic level of war still unresolved.

How then does this deep misappraisal of military theory square with the astounding military successes accomplished by Germany in the campaigns against Poland and France? On the one hand, factors unrelated to military theory enabled German forces to gain decisive tactical victories. An innovative approach to combined-arms warfare, an institution capable of producing world-class officers, and a large and competent air force led to dramatic tactical successes. However, tactical success alone is insufficient to explain the massive operational coups that underpinned German victories. This apparent contradiction can be resolved through the fact that the German way of war was nonetheless highly effective on the tactical-operational level. German emphasis on

mobile formations as a solution to the positional warfare of the First World War enabled a compression of the factors of space and time that a battle constituted. Through this, the principles of the battle of annihilation, that Schlieffen derives from Cannae, were able to be applied once again writ large. However, underwriting these successes is the crucial factor of strategic depth. Both Poland and France were small enough that the compression of space allowed by mobility allowed for a rapid war-deciding decision to be made in a single operation; a single battle of annihilation was able to decide the war along the traditional German paradigm. The war with the Soviet Union involved frontages, depths, and reserves of sufficient magnitude that the increase in mobility afforded by the very-partial mechanization of the German Army was insufficient to compress the time and space and allow the initial “meeting engagement” to be decisive. Thus, the German way of war aimed at rendering the enemy helpless through a single decisive battle of annihilation was effective only when facing a state with limited strategic depth where a single battle could be strategically decisive. Thus, as evidenced in the German Soviet War, the German way of war proved unadapted both to the reality of operations involving space and time factors and towards the unlimited political objectives of the Nazi leadership.

In this manner, the effect of politics on the German-Soviet War can be understood as the institutional rebirth of the Red Army and the strangulation of the German Army. Hitler’s megalomania and personal leadership qualities prevented him from making use of the talented professionals that surrounded him in the manner that Stalin was able to grow to do over the course of the war. The differences in institutional relations,

institutional culture, and strategic apparatus (or lack thereof) caused the divergent evolution of the German and Soviet armies over the course of the war. The operational arts were both influenced by the politics that produced them and in a discursive manner affected how the armies viewed their own relations to politics. The German way of war, derived from a monarchist tradition that privileged the army as a co-equal and at times superior branch of government, rejected the consideration of strategic-political factors in its operational art and as such did not think beyond gaining a decisive battle of encirclement. By contrast, the Red Army, finding its origins in the Bolshevik party, understood its operations in the context of the goals of Bolshevik ideology and thus in an inherently political framework. The result of this was a far greater engagement with the strategic level of war and the emergence of the concept of first “Successive Operations” and then “Deep Battle” that were based in an understanding of the political features of the next war. The Soviet theorist Isserson wrote in 1938 “It is completely obvious that, with the modern scope of armed conflict, a single operation, even with the most decisive outcome, still does not revolve the aims of an armed conflict. The enemy cannot be defeated in one or two operations to such a degree that he is forced to cease fighting.”<sup>153</sup> This “completely obvious” fact was one utterly antithetical to the German way of war but one that’s truthfulness was demonstrated through the course of the German-Soviet War. In this manner the vital importance of integrating political objectives into not only operational planning but the formulation of operational art in order to ensure congruence between means and ends is illustrated.

This conclusion may be seen as relevant both in the context of developing a greater understanding of the processes of the German-Soviet War (and the armies that

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<sup>153</sup> Isserson, “Operational Prospects for the Future” in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art*, 81.

fought it) as well as for forming a normative view of the relationship between war and policy. From the cases of the Heer and the RKKA the manner in which the relationship between the political and the military can be either constructive or destructive becomes clear. Both too much political control or too little are revealed to be disastrous, either suppressing the ability of professionals to utilize their technical skill or preventing the development of strategy and the use of the army as a tool of policy. In examining the German-Soviet War, the Red Army from 1943 onwards demonstrates a productive relationship between the army and political leaders, effectively utilizing military means to pursue policy aims without stifling, or indeed terrorizing, effect from the political authority. The experience of the Heer serves as a cautionary tale of the ability for an army to develop a culture that resents civilian rule as well as a warning against attempts to too sharply draw the line between war and politics. Taken as a whole, the interaction between politics and war in the course of the German-Soviet War illustrates the necessity for institutional coordination and a theoretical framework from which to develop a strategy as a prerequisite for successfully prosecuting a war.

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