Erich von Manstein Explains the German Defeat (Retrospective Account, 1955)

Abstract

In his postwar memoirs, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein (1887-1973) attributed Germany's defeat not to the performance of German soldiers or officers but rather to Adolf Hitler's mistakes and Russia's numerical superiority.

Source

HITLER AS SUPREME COMMANDER

My appointment as commander of Don Army Group brought me for the first time under Hitler's direct orders as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces [*Wehrmacht*] and the Army [*Heer*]. Only now did I find myself in a position to see how he tried to fulfil the duties of a supreme war leader besides those of a Head of State, for hitherto I had felt his influence on military decisions at best indirectly and from afar. Because of the strict secrecy surrounding all matters of an operational nature, I had been unable to form any valid opinion of my own.

During the campaign in *Poland* we had been unaware of any interference by Hitler in the leadership of the army. On his two visits to v. Rundstedt's army group he had listened sympathetically to our interpretations of the situation and agreed to our intentions without making any attempt to intervene.

As for the plan for the occupation of *Norway,* no outsider had known anything whatever about it.

Hitler's attitude regarding the *offensive in the west* has already been discussed in detail. It was certainly both deplorable and alarming that he should have completely passed over O.K.H. in this matter, yet it had to be conceded that his view that the solution must be an offensive one was fundamentally correct from the *military* point of view, even if the same could not be said of his original timing. Admittedly he had laid down the outline of a plan which – as has already been pointed out – could hardly have produced a complete solution. At that stage he had probably not thought it possible to attain results on the scale ultimately achieved. Nevertheless, when the plan put up by Army Group A offered him this possibility, he had immediately grasped the idea and adopted it himself – even though he imposed certain limitations which betrayed his aversion to risks. His fatal mistake of halting the armor outside Dunkirk had not at the time been apparent to an outsider, for the sight of beaches bestrewn with abandoned equipment tended to deceive anyone not yet aware how successful the British had been in getting their troops back across the Channel.

The absence of a 'war plan' permitting the timely preparation of an *invasion* did, however, reveal a failure of Wehrmacht leadership – in other words, on the part of Hitler himself. On the other hand, it was impossible for anyone not actually on the spot to judge whether or not the decision to turn on the Soviet Union was unavoidable for political reasons. The Soviet deployment on the German, Hungarian and Rumanian frontiers certainly looked menacing enough.

As commander of a corps and later of Eleventh Army I learnt just as little of Hitler's influence on the plan for an attack on the *Soviet Union* and the conduct of operations in the first phase of the campaign as I did of the plans for the summer offensive in 1942. There had certainly been no interference by Hitler in the handling of the Crimean campaign. Indeed, he had agreed to our intentions without hesitation when I went to see him in spring 1942 and

had doubtless done everything to make our success at Sevastopol possible. I have already mentioned that I considered Eleventh Army to have been wrongly used after the fall of the fortress.

Now that I had come immediately under Hitler in my capacity as an army group commander, however, I was to get my first real experience of him in his exercise of the supreme command.

When considering Hitler in the role of a military leader, one should certainly not dismiss him with such cliches as 'the lance-corporal of World War I.'

He undoubtedly had a certain eye for operational openings, as had been shown by the way he opted for Army Group A's plan in the west. Indeed, this is often to be found in military amateurs – otherwise history would not have recorded so many dukes and princes as successful commanders. In addition, though, Hitler possessed an astoundingly retentive memory and an imagination that made him quick to grasp all technical matters and problems of armaments. He was amazingly familiar with the effect of the very latest enemy weapons and could reel off whole columns of figures on both our own and the enemy's war production. Indeed, this was his favorite way of side-tracking any topic that was not to his liking. There can be no question that his insight and unusual energy were responsible for many achievements in the sphere of armaments. Yet his belief in his own superiority in this respect ultimately had disastrous consequences. His interference prevented the smooth and timely development of the Luftwaffe, and it was undoubtedly he who hampered the development of rocket propulsion and atomic weapons.

Moreover, Hitler's interest in everything technical led him to overestimate the importance of his technical resources. As a result, he would count on a mere handful of assault-gun detachments or the new Tiger tanks to restore situations where only large bodies of troops could have any prospect of success.

What he lacked, broadly speaking, was simply *military ability based on experience* – something for which his 'intuition' was no substitute.

While Hitler may have had an eye for tactical opportunity and could quickly seize a chance when it was offered to him, he still lacked the ability to assess the prerequisites and practicability of a plan of operations. He failed to understand that the objectives and ultimate scope of an operation must be in direct proportion to the time and forces needed to carry it out – to say nothing of the possibilities of supply. He did not – or would not – realize that any long-range offensive operation calls for a steady build-up of troops over and above those committed in the original assault. All this was brought out with striking clarity in the planning and execution of the 1942 summer offensive. Another example was the fantastic idea he disclosed to me in autumn 1942 of driving through the Caucasus to the Near East and India with a motorized army group.

As in the political sphere (at all events after his successes of 1938), so in the military did Hitler lack all sense of *judgement* regarding what could be achieved and what could not. In autumn 1939, despite his contempt for France's powers of resistance, he had not originally recognized the possibility of attaining decisive success by a correctly planned German offensive. Yet when this success actually became his, he lost his eye for opportunity where conditions were different. What he lacked in each case was a real training in strategy and grand tactics.

And so this active mind seized on almost any aim that caught his fancy, causing him to fritter away Germany's strength by taking on several objectives simultaneously, often in the most dispersed theatres of war. The rule that *one can never be too strong at the crucial spot,* that one may even have to dispense with less vital fronts or accept the risk of radically weakening them in order to achieve a decisive aim, was something he never really grasped. As

a result, in the offensives of 1942 and 1943 he could not bring himself to stake *everything* on success. Neither was he able or willing to see what action would be necessary to compensate for the unfavorable turn which events then took.

As for *Hitler's strategic aims* (at least in the conflict with the Soviet Union), these were to a very great extent conditioned by political considerations and the needs of the German war economy. This has already been indicated in the introductory remarks on the Russian campaign and will emerge again in connexion with the defensive battles of the years 1943-44.

Now, questions of a political and economic nature are undoubtedly of great importance when it comes to fixing strategic aims. What Hitler overlooked was that the achievement and – most important of all – the retention of a territorial objective presupposes the defeat of the enemy's armed forces. So long as this military issue is undecided – and this may be seen from the struggle against the Soviet Union – the attainment of territorial aims in the form of economically valuable areas remains problematical and their long-term retention a sheer impossibility. The day had yet to come when one could wreak such havoc on the enemy's armament centres or transport system with raiding aircraft or guided missiles that he was rendered incapable of continuing the fight.

While strategy must unquestionably be an instrument in the hands of the political leadership, the latter must not disregard – as did Hitler to a great extent when fixing operational objectives – the fact that the strategic aim of any war is to smash the military defensive power of the enemy. Only when victory has been secured is the way open to the realization of political and economic aims.

This brings me to the factor which probably did more than anything else to determine the character of Hitler's leadership – his over-estimation of the *power of the will.* This *will,* as he saw it, had only to be translated *into faith* down to the youngest private soldier for the correctness of his decisions to be confirmed and the success of his orders ensured.

Obviously, a strong will in a supreme commander is one of the essential prerequisites of victory. Many a battle has been lost and many a success thrown away because the supreme leader's will failed at the critical moment.

The will for victory which gives a commander the strength to see a grave crisis through is something very different from Hitler's will, which in the last analysis stemmed from a belief in his own 'mission'. Such a belief inevitably makes a man impervious to reason and leads him to think that his own will can operate even beyond the limits of hard r e a l i t y – whether these consist in the presence of far superior enemy forces, in the conditions of space and time, or merely in the fact that the enemy also happens to have a will of his own.

Generally speaking, Hitler had little inclination to relate his own calculations to the probable intentions of the enemy, since he was convinced that his will would always triumph in the end. He was equally disinclined to accept any reports, however reliable, of enemy superiority, even though the latter might be many times stronger than he. Hitler either rejected such reports out of hand or minimized them with assertions about the enemy's deficiencies and took refuge in endless recitations of German production figures.

In the face of his will, the essential elements of the 'appreciation' of a situation on which every military commander's decision must be based were virtually eliminated. And with that Hitler turned his back on reality.

The only remarkable feature was that this over-estimation of his own willpower, this disregard for the enemy's resources and possible intentions, was not matched by a corresponding boldness of decision. The same man who, after his successes in politics up to 1938, had become a political gambler, actually recoiled from risks in the military

field. The only bold military decision that may be booked to Hitler's credit was probably the one he took to occupy Norway, and even then the original suggestion had come from Grand-Admiral Raeder. Even here, as soon as a crisis cropped up at Narvik, Hitler was on the point of ordering the evacuation of the city and thereby of sacrificing the fundamental aim of the entire operation, which was to keep the iron-ore routes open. During the execution of the western campaign, too, as we have seen earlier, Hitler showed a certain aversion to taking military risks. The decision to attack the Soviet Union was, in the last analysis, the inevitable outcome of cancelling the invasion of Britain, which Hitler had likewise found too risky.

During the Russian campaign Hitler's fear of risk manifested itself in two ways. One - as will be shown later – was his refusal to accept that elasticity of operations which, in the conditions obtaining from 1943 onwards, could be achieved only by a voluntary, if temporary surrender of conquered territory. The second was his fear to denude secondary fronts or subsidiary theatres in favour of the spot where the main decision had to fall, even when a failure to do so was palpably dangerous.

There are three possible reasons why Hitler evaded these risks in the military field. First, he may secretly have felt that he lacked the military ability to cope with them. This being so, he was even less likely to credit his generals with having it. The second reason was the fear, common to all dictators, that his prestige would be shaken by any setbacks. In practice this attitude is bound to lead to the commission of military mistakes which damage the man's prestige more than ever. Thirdly, there was Hitler's intense dislike, rooted in his lust for power, of giving up anything on which he had once laid hands.

In the same context mention may be made of another trait of Hitler's against which his Chief-of-Staff, Colonel-General Zeitzler, and I both battled in vain throughout the period in which I was commanding Don Army Group.

Whenever he was confronted with a decision which he did not like taking but could not ultimately evade, Hitler would procrastinate as long as he possibly could. This happened every time it was urgently necessary for us to commit forces to battle in time to forestall an operational success by the enemy or to prevent its exploitation. The General Staff had to struggle with Hitler for days on end before it could get forces released from less-threatened sectors of the front to be sent to a crisis spot. In most cases he would give too small a number of troops when it was already too late – with the result that he usually finished up by having to grant several times what had originally been required. The tussle used to last for whole weeks when it was a question of abandoning untenable positions like the Donetz area in 1943 or the Dnieper Bend in 1944. The same applied to the evacuation of unimportant salients on quiet stretches of front for the purpose of acquiring extra forces. Possibly Hitler always expected things to go his way in the end, thereby enabling him to avoid decisions which were repugnant to him if only because they meant recognizing the fact that he must accommodate himself to the enemy's actions. His inflated belief in his own will-power, a certain aversion to accepting any risk in mobile operations (the *retour offensif,* for example) when its success could not be guaranteed in advance, and his dislike of giving up anything voluntarily – such were the factors which influenced Hitler's military leadership more and more as time went on. Obstinate defence of every foot of ground gradually became the be all and end all of that leadership. And so, after the Wehrmacht had won such extraordinary successes in the first years of war by dint of operational mobility, Hitler's reaction when the first crisis occurred in front of Moscow was to adopt Stalin's precept of hanging on doggedly to every single position. It was a policy that had brought the Soviet leaders so close to the abyss in 1941 that they finally relinquished it when the Germans launched their 1942 offensive.

Yet because the Soviet counter-offensive in that winter of 1941 had been frustrated by the resistance of our troops, Hitler was convinced that his ban on any voluntary withdrawal had saved the Germans from the fate of Napoleon's

Grand Army in 1812. In this belief, admittedly, he was reinforced by the acquiescent attitude of his own retinue and several commanders at the front. When, therefore, a fresh crisis arose in autumn 1942 after the German offensive had become bogged down outside Stalingrad and in the Caucasus, Hitler again thought the arcanum of success lay in clinging at all costs to what he already possessed. Henceforth he could never be brought to renounce this notion.

Now it is generally recognized that defense is the stronger of the two forms of fighting. This is only true, however, when the defense is so efficacious that the attacker bleeds to death when assaulting the defender's positions. Such a thing was out of the question on the Eastern Front, where the number of German divisions available was never sufficient for so strong a defense to be organized. The enemy, being many times stronger than we were, was always able, by massing his forces at points of his own choice, to break through fronts that were far too widely extended. As a result, large numbers of German forces were unable to avoid encirclement. Only in mobile operations could the superiority of the German staffs and fighting troops have been turned to account and, perhaps, the forces of the Soviet Union ultimately brought to naught.

The effects of Hitler's ever-increasing predilection for 'hanging on at all costs' will be dealt with in greater detail in connexion with the defensive battles fought on the Eastern Front in 1943 and 1944. The reason for his insistence on it may be found deep down in his own personality. He was a man who saw fighting only in terms of the utmost brutality. His way of thinking conformed more to a mental picture of masses of the enemy bleeding to death before our lines than to the conception of a subtle fencer who knows how to make an occasional step backwards in order to lunge for the decisive thrust. For the *art* of war, he substituted a brute force which, as he saw it, was guaranteed maximum effectiveness by the willpower behind it.

Since Hitler placed the power of force above that of the mind and, while having every regard for a soldier's bravery, did not rate his ability to the same extent, it is hardly surprising that, in the same way as he over-rated technical expedients, he was possessed of '*la rage du nombre*'. He would intoxicate himself with the production figures of the German armaments industry, which he had undoubtedly boosted to an amazing extent, even if he preferred to overlook the fact that the enemy's armaments figures were higher still.

What he forgot was the amount of training and skill required to render a new weapon fully effective. Once the new weapons had reached the front, he was content. It did not worry him whether the units concerned had mastered them or not, or whether a weapon had even been tested under combat conditions.

In just the same way Hitler was constantly ordering new divisions to be set up. Though an increase in the number of our formations was most desirable, they had to be filled at the cost of replacements for the divisions already in existence, which in course of time were drained of their last drop of blood. At the same time, the newly established formations initially had to pay an excessively high toll of killed because of their lack of battle experience. The Luftwaffe Field Divisions, the unending series of SS divisions and finally the so-called People's Grenadier Divisions were the most blatant examples.

A final point worth mentioning is that although Hitler was always harping on his 'soldierly' outlook and loved to recall that he had acquired his military experience as a *front-line soldier,* his character had as little in common with the thoughts and emotions of soldiers as had his party with the Prussian virtues which it was so fond of invoking.

Hitler was certainly quite clearly informed of conditions at the front through the reports he received from the army groups and armies. In addition, he frequently interviewed officers who had just returned from the front-line areas. Thus, he was not only aware of the achievements of our troops, but also knew what continuous overstrain

they had had to endure since the beginning of the Russian campaign. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why we never managed to get Hitler anywhere near a front line in the east. It was hard enough to persuade him to visit our Army Group headquarters; the idea of going any further forward never occurred to him. It may be that he feared such trips would destroy those golden dreams about his invincible will.

Despite the pains Hitler took to stress his own former status as a front-line soldier, I still never had the feeling that his heart belonged to the fighting troops. Losses, as far as he was concerned, were merely figures which reduced fighting power. They are unlikely to have seriously disturbed him as a human being.

[…]

Just as he considered the power of his will to be in every way decisive, so had his political successes – and, indeed, the military victories early in the war, which he regarded as his own personal achievement – caused him to lose all sense of proportion in assessing his own capabilities. To him the acceptance of advice from a jointly responsible Chief-of-Staff would not have meant supplementing his own will but submitting it to that of another. Added to this was the fact that he was imbued by origin and background with an insuperable mistrust of the military leaders, whose code and way of thinking were alien to him. Thus, he was not prepared to see a really responsible military adviser alongside himself. He wanted to be another Napoleon, who had only tolerated men under him who would obediently carry out his will. Unfortunately, he had neither Napoleon's military training nor his military genius.

[…]

Source: Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, edited and translated by Anthony G. Powell, Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1958, pp. 273-81. English translation © 1958 by Methuen & Co. *Ltd. Metheun is no longer the copyright holder, the Regnery Company no longer exists, and were unable to determine the copyright status of this edition.*

Recommended Citation: Erich von Manstein Explains the German Defeat (Retrospective Account, 1955), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-216> [September 16, 2026].