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A REFLECTION ON THE CAUSES OF THE GERMAN DEFEAT

Summary.

Germany lost the last war for purely military reasons.

I. Blunders of the High Command, especially Adolf Hitler.

1. Excessive self-confidence of Adolf Hitler.
2. Overrating of importance of holding territory. (Wrong impressions gained from World War I.)
3. Increasing mistrust of Generals.
4. Wrong ideas on air warfare. (Wrong development of the Air Force, too few fighters!)
5. Commanding officers of the Waffen-SS units mostly insufficiently trained and not prepared for their tasks.

II. Wrong Employment of Manpower. No total Mobilization. Wrong Distribution of available Manpower.

1. Disregard of the Army (neglecting the fact that the Army has to bear the main burden of all fighting).
2. Excessive manpower used in all administrative and economic civilian offices and in the whole apparatus of the N.S.D.A.P. (especially the miscellaneous organizations of Himmler, Reich Labor Service, and others).

3. Four completely separated components of the Armed Forces with special agencies for supply, etc.
4. Insufficient replacements for the Army in spite of the heavy losses. Preference given to the Air Force and the Waffen-SS, not only in quantity but also in quality.

A REFLECTION ON THE CAUSES OF THE GERMAN DEFEAT

Much will be written about this subject at some future time by qualified, and probably still more by unqualified persons. To treat it exhaustively would undoubtedly require a thick volume. Therefore, the following opinions can be evaluated only as patchwork. I am stating them with the reservation imposed upon me by the limited insight I was able to gain from the various positions I held. They do not, however, intend either to make excuses or to cover up anything.

Germany lost this war for purely military reasons. The causes of the defeat must be sought in the blunders committed by the High Command, and in the wrong use made of the effective strength of the Nation.

I. The High Command.

The mistakes of the High Command began when Hitler started to exercise a decisive influence upon it, that is, approximately from spring of 1942 on. The question has often been asked how it happened that Hitler considered the military command to be his personal field, that he made decisions and gave orders independent of the counsel of the generals in charge, and even contrary to their recommendations. I tried even during the war to gain a clear understanding on this point. The "leader" principle (Führerprinzip) of the authoritarian State was not the sole cause. To the unlimited authority vested in him was added his own personal peculiarity, of which the most conspicuous characteristics were an excessive obstinacy of will and a self-confidence in a similar degree. The successes of 1939 and 1940 particularly increased his self-confidence as well as his personal prestige, not only in political but even more in military matters. Hitler considered the war in the West in 1940

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his real job. The following incident is typical: In August 1939 he spoke before the Commanding Generals of Army Groups, Armies, and Corps of the forces poised against Poland, and said among other things: "I do not believe that England and France will intervene in this war (against Poland). But if they do, then the war in the West be decided in a single, great, continuous battle." Many, especially the notables of the Party, but also a great many of the plain people, believed in him. After the war in 1940 this faith assumed even an almost mystical aspect. It was then that Goering coined the expression "the greatest military leader of all times." If anybody did look upon him with skepticism it was the generals. The more he usurped control, and the more the consequences became apparent, the more this skepticism increased.

The unquestionable successes, the response he felt among the masses, and the flatteries from some of his entourage as expressed in the above-cited words of Goering, combined to arouse in him gradually the belief in his mission to be a military leader. The final impetus may have been furnished by his intervention in the winter battles in Russia in December 1941. For a long period of time, the Army, which had been ill-equipped for the winter and had received no replacements for losses since the beginning of the war, was unable to resist a Russian assault. Hitler refused all suggestions as to how to restore the situation, assumed himself supreme command over the Army, and forbade any operation which involved a withdrawal. Every position had to be held at all costs. Not until the enemy gained the rear of a position was a withdrawal permitted to the absolutely necessary extent. The Russian offensive gradually bogged down, thanks to the gigantic achievements of the troops and their command. The principle of stubborn resistance in all operations, difficult for friend and foe alike due to the winter conditions, accounted for part of the

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success. Hitler, however, came to believe that he personally had saved the Army in the East. From that moment on he tolerated no difference of opinion whatsoever. The following incident occurring at that time is typical: When one of the most influential generals submitted to him an opinion differing from his own and attempted to defend it, he interrupted him saying: "What do you know about war! In the World War (World War I) you served at high headquarters, but I gained my knowledge of war with the troops."

It is clear that the qualifications for military leadership cannot be acquired without a thorough tactical and operational schooling and practical experience. Hitler's military experience could never qualify anybody for the supreme military command. A man who lacks this background my work with the Military High Command for years but will nevertheless gain only little experience from it. The lack in operationally trained thinking must reveal itself particularly when evaluating a situation. This very thing was one of Hitler's two fundamental shortcomings and weaknesses. He very often failed to estimate the situation correctly, no matter whether it was a question of the possibility of reaching an objective in the offensive, of the enemy's main effort, or of the power of resistance of our own forces in the defense. Naturally, the decisions based on such estimates had to be wrong. Such mistakes happened always in critical situations, and as a rule were of decisive importance.

However, his character played just as important a role in this connection as his lack of training. His excessive obstinacy influenced the functioning of his mind to such an extent that he saw the unclarified aspects of the situation the way he wanted them to be. To this must be added that in cases where his judgment failed because of the lack of training in operational thinking,

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he eagerly took refuge in intuition and a conception based on his instinct. He is known to have made such utterances as: "With the unwavering certainty of a sleepwalker" or, when discussing the main effort of the Russian Summer Offensive of 1944, which led to a wrong conclusion, "I rely upon my intuition." However, intuition and conceptions based on instinct were again dominated by his will. Thus, those valuable elements in the process of making decisions, essential for any commander, were directed into the wrong channels and became a source of grave mistakes.

Hitler's second basic shortcomings was the constant, onesided overrating of the importance of holding territory and his clinging to terrain. Naturally, this fault was of no importance until beginning approximately in fall of 1942 when the German Army had been largely forced into the defensive. Only in very rare cases could Hitler be induced to abandon territory without fighting, even when all arguments supported such action. Particularly in defensive situations, forced movements of a part of the front often resulted in large salients in the front lines which could be occupied only by **weak** forces due to the resulting lengthening of the front. The recommended withdrawal from the salient to a position at its base would have resulted in a shortening of the front and an increased density of the occupation. This in turn would very often have brought about a considerable reinforcement of the defensw without disadvantage to the general situation. If the enemy attacked the weak salient, it was often dented or broken. The troops, however, were then no longer able to hold the base of the position. Not only was more territory lost this way than would have been abandoned more expediently, but new salients were formed which were threatened by the same fate. The Russians soon found out about this and acted accordingly. Whenever it was suggested that a front sector be rectified, Hitler used the

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argument that it did not make the enemy any weaker, that the relationship of strength remained rather the same on both sides. It was impossible to make it clear to him that, for example, it was much more difficult for three divisions to hold a front of 60 kilometers against ten enemy divisions than a front of only 20 to 25 kilometers.

Some unnecessary pockets were formed which had to be relieved at all cost. This resulted in great losses which in turn caused a further weakening of the front. Hitler not only reserved for himself operational movements on a rather large-scale, but he even interfered with the handling of the troops. Regiments and even battalions were not allowed to adjust obviously unfavorable sectors of their positions except with his approval. However, here it was usually possible to find a way out.

How many areas would have been held, how many losses in men and equipment would have been avoided if it had been possible to take appropriate measures in time! What vast spaces were available in 1943 for a truly strategical conduct of defense! However, the command from the Army Group (Heeresgruppe) on down had no freedom of action. The defense consisted of nothing else but an inept attempt to hold occupied territory stubbornly with insufficient forces and means. This had to lead to failure.

If we trace this mental attitude to its roots, we find that they consisted to some extent of falsely evaluated impressions obtained on a very low level during the First World War. This is apparent from Hitler's utterances. During World War I, the heavy barrage (Trommelfeuer) made mobile defense the only form of combat that permitted any possible success in the defense. The German command conducted it skillfully despite the only limited territory in France.

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At this level, Hitler was not able to gain true insight into success at that time; abandoned territory meant to him nothing but failure. It is strange that laymen without military background, and the mass of the people in general, still believe in the strategy of the 17th and 18th centuries with its highest objective of "taking" and holding ground. Strangely enough, the change initiated by Napoleon is scarcely understood correctly by them although it was very much in evidence in all wars of the 19th and 20th centuries. It does seem to be very difficult for the operationally untrained mind to differentiate between seizing of ground as an end in itself, and reaping it like a ripe fruit after the enemy forces have been smashed.

To this attitude must be added Hitler's growing mistrust of the generals. He could not help but feel the opposition of the experts. Persons of his entourage with selfish designs not only made much of it but also shifted it from the professional to the political side.

In this manner the Supreme High Command made serious mistakes of decisive importance which essentially influenced the outcome of the war. To give a detailed account of them would require a report of a larger scope.

When speaking of the Supreme Command in a broader sense, Goering as Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe must be included. He was called to his post for political reasons. The most conspicuous trait of his character was a brutal determination. Although he was an excellent fighter squadron commander (Jagdstaffel-fuehrer) in the First World War, he nevertheless lacked training for higher military command. He was unable to analyze logically the problems of the strategy of air warfare which, at that time, were an unexplored field for the entire world. Although he would have been more easily approached by an adviser than



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Hitler, there was none of any importance. The best mind of the German Luftwaffe, General Wever, had become the victim of an airplane accident long before the war. The chief of the new Air General Staff was indeed a man of high intellectual level, but he was young and lacked adequate experience. The result was that wrong theories concerning the conduct of air warfare were formed, as a consequence of which the organization of the Luftwaffe was based on wrong ideas. The German struggle for air supremacy was unbalanced and therefore could not produce a decisive success.\* The catastrophic error in placing the output of fighters far behind that of bombers was recognized by wide circles of the Luftwaffe (for example, General Galland) and the Army as early as 1942. Goering remained adamant. He did not concern himself with this question until spring of 1944. At the time of the Ardennes offensive (middle of December 1944) we did succeed in mustering 2,400 fighters (Jaeger), the largest number the German Luftwaffe ever had. The pilots were, however, not sufficiently trained and largely inexperienced in battle and therefore unable to play any important role whatsoever. If the conversion had been started as early as 1942 when bombers had stopped flying over England, as had been recommended repeatedly, approximately 3 to 4,000 well-trained fighter pilots (Jaeger) would have been available by the middle of 1944, the majority of them equipped with the most modern planes.

The inexpertly directed air warfare and the inappropriate development of the Luftwaffe were further factors which decisively influenced the outcome of the war. Here too, a detailed account would require a report of a larger scope.

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\*Admiral Spaatz' report in this connection in "Foreign Affairs" 1946 is very conclusive. [Ed. Note: The writer refers to an article on "Strategic Air Power" by General Carl Spaatz in "Foreign Affairs", Vol. 24, No. 3, April 1946.]

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The following statements do not belong to the chapter "Supreme Command" ("Oberste Fuehrung"); they deal only with a section of the intermediate (mittlere) and lower commands, but shall be mentioned here nevertheless.

Another disadvantageous result created by the defective military training of the two men at the top of the military command was that, without weighing the consequences, many command post positions in units of the ever-expanding Waffen-SS were filled with men who lacked the necessary military training and education. It was believed that energy and aggressiveness were all the qualifications necessary for the military leader. This mistake was made particularly in the case of battalion and regimental commanders, of whom a rather large number did not have sufficient military training. However, also a number of commanding generals of divisions and corps' did not possess any military training worth mentioning, not to speak of the Commander in Chief of the one and only SS-Army.

The result was that many SS-units were inexpertly led, suffered extremely high losses, and did not achieve battle successes which they would have attained under expert command. There is no doubt that the Army would have been able to provide able commanders despite its very critical personnel situation.

## II. Use of the Effective Strength of the Nation

There was much talk in Germany about "total war," but in reality total mobilization was never effected. Once the decision was made to carry out an almost total mobilization it was too late. This was a basic error which had the most serious consequences. The second error, just as grave, was the inequitable distribution of personnel to the various organizations (Bedarfs-traeger). I can say right here that the worst part of this error was the definite neglect of the Army which, after all, had to carry the main burden of the fight. It did not receive the quota that was its due and which it could have been allotted without doubt.

Germany's official authorities showed a tendency to create separate agencies and offices even for insignificant tasks although existing agencies would have been well able to deal with them, and in addition a tendency to provide all agencies with excessive personnel. This was especially noticeable in all agencies of the public administration in the Reich, the regions (Laender), districts (Gaue) and cities, as well as in the occupied territories. I heard complaints that some agencies were so big that they could no longer be supervised and their efficiency was impaired. An expert in administration estimated that the excess personnel could be used to organize about one dozen divisions. Not until very late was an attempt made to reduce the personnel and to utilize the surplus. This could be accomplished only to a minor extent.

A similar condition existed in the departments of the State Economic Administration (staatliche Wirtschaftsleitung). Agencies grew like mushrooms. Specialization was carried to extremes. It is obvious that the war created many problems for this organization. However, it also knew no limits in the

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creation of offices and in the estimate of personnel requirements, disregarding in both cases the discretion which the best interests of the nation required.

To this was added the over-staffed organization of the Party which believed to be an end in itself, and the ever-increasing agencies of Himmler.

The fact that the Reichsarbeitsdienst - RAD - (German Labor Service) continued to exist during the war was beyond comprehension; it was particularly difficult to understand why the Labor Service for girls with its entire machine was maintained. The German Labor Service was even broadened in scope, and organized its own Flak (anti-aircraft) batteries.

Furthermore, the so-called Kunstbetrieb (pursuit of art) - theaters and motion pictures - continued for a long time without any restriction.

The administrative organization of private industry and commerce was extremely complicated and required too much manpower.

In this enumeration several items have probably been overlooked. Nevertheless, it is clear that within the sphere of civilian life hundreds of thousands were employed unnecessarily. Later attempts to make additional manpower available were not very successful as they were sabotaged. Those who could be pried loose after a number of years, were disappointed and embittered. They had to be assigned to units, insufficiently trained due to the pressure of time.

As far as military matters are concerned, there existed even in peacetime four separate organizations, independent of each other in every respect:

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The Army, the Navy, the Luftwaffe, and the Waffen-SS. I am not going to deal here with the question whether all or some of the branches of the Wehrmacht (Armed Forces) should be combined under a unified command or not. However, due to the absolute separation there were, in peacetime and still more during the war, hundreds of military authorities dealing separately with identical matters, as for example, quarters, rations, clothing, hospitals, courts, etc. Wartime supply shipments were also handled separately by the different branches of the service, except, in some instances, the Waffen-SS. They also required separate agencies with their own personnel for this task. All this necessitated an excessive number of men.

However, of decisive importance was the fact that the Army was badly neglected in the assignment of personnel to the three branches of the Wehrmacht. The the Navy was liberally provided with personnel did not matter too much as its total strength was not great. At any rate, it received the quota it needed. The case of the Luftwaffe, on the other hand, was different. Due to Goering's all-permeating influence, the Luftwaffe had several hundred-thousand men fit for active service over and above its absolute need. They were scarcely kept busy, or at least not used to their full capacity. The request for the release of personnel made by the Army was defeated by Goering's opposition and influence. When he felt himself no longer able to justify the large number of superfluous personnel, he nevertheless did not transfer this personnel to the Army where it could have been trained and used appropriately. Instead, he took it upon himself to organize 24 infantry divisions which remained with the Luftwaffe and were called Luftwaffen Feld Divisionen (Air Force Field Divisions). These divisions consisted of very good personnel. However, they were not trained, as the Luftwaffe had no means available for this purpose. The commanders, except for a few, were not able to cope with their tasks either,

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as they too lacked training. To give examples would lead too far. The result, aside from a few exceptions, was that these troops, accomplished little and always suffered heavy losses. This was the case despite the fact that their equipment and their infantry weapons were very modern and much more plentiful than those of the infantry of the Army. The following will serve as an example: Until the fall of 1942 I commanded an excellent infantry division in Russia. The division was always in the midst of the fighting. After the losses of the first battles, the infantry never had more than seven light machine guns, Model 34, instead of the prescribed 9. In the fall of 1942 an adjacent Luftwaffen Field Division had 12 light machine guns Model 42 (the most modern type) in the company and, in addition, 12 in reserve in the company train. The strength of the companies of my division after the initial fighting was never more than 90, frequently only 60 to 70 men; that of the Luftwaffen Field Division was 150 to 170 men.

In 1942 the Luftwaffe would have been able to put at the disposal of the Army sufficient personnel for at least 50 divisions. Perhaps the same number would have been obtained by genuine total mobilization and an appropriate reduction of the tremendous non-military apparatus.

Another important disadvantage arose for the Army from the nature of the replacement system. Whoever enlisted voluntarily for military service (Waffen-dienst) before his induction date had the choice of any component of the armed forces. The system of enlisting volunteers and giving a free choice of any component undoubtedly had many good points. However, it became evident that the preference for the different components and branches were also subject to a sort of changing fashion. Furthermore, the Luftwaffe and the Waffen-SS openly conducted recruiting drives in the junior colleges (Oberschulen) and

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the high schools (Gynasien). The result was that an extremely large number of volunteers, representing the most intelligent and enterprising among them, enlisted in the Luftwaffe and the Waffen-SS. The number of enlistments in the Army did not in the least correspond to its seize. Of these volunteers the majority enlisted for Panzer troops, fewer for artillery, and only a small number for the infantry. In this manner the best elements were lost to the Army and especially the infantry. The system of induction of the conscripted men (those who did not enlist voluntarily) did the rest. The representative of the Luftwaffe was the first to select his quota from the young men appearing at the recruiting offices for induction; the representative of the Waffen-SS was the next. Whatever was left was assigned to the Army. The following serves as an example: Men who could have been trained as non-commissioned officers, specialists\* and even as officers were employed by the Waffen-SS as privates, because the number of qualified personnel so far exceeded the available openings that there was no other use for them. The Army, on the other hand, was unable to muster sufficient trainees for non-commissioned officers and had to resort to less capable personnel for this purpose. For example, in summer of 1942 my division was able to fill only 40% of its quota of officer candidates. It had scarcely enough men to fill the T/O for specialists while double T/O strength was required. Such conditions could not but lower unnecessarily the quality and the efficiency of highly important branches of the service (such as infantry, artillery, and engineers).

All these factors combined to prevent the Army from obtaining its possible numerical strength and from raising its quality.

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\*Radio and telephone operators, range-finder operators, horseshoers, radio and telephone mechanics, etc. were called specialists.

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Summarizing the above statements, which are far from exhaustive, we see three main causes for the unparalleled proportions of the German defeat:

1. The decisive mistakes of the Supreme Command and their inevitable consequences. They were widely recognized in time, especially by generals. There was no one, however, who was able to find a way to oppose Hitler in his position of unlimited power and his personal way of exercising that power, and who was strong enough to do so.
2. The wrong development of the Luftwaffe. It was also recognized in time by men who had no power of decision.
3. The withering away of the Army, which was pointed out again and again.

While reflecting on the above described facts, I recall a statement in the book of the British General Fuller "Erinnerungen eines bedenkamen Soldaten" ("Memories of a Studious Soldier"),\*\* Fuller is citing Herodotus who attributes the following saying to a Persian of the 6th century B.C. (quoting from memory): "No one believes in warnings, no matter how true they may be. Many of us Persians know the danger, but the distress of our country compels us to follow our leader and to do everything he asks us to do. Truly, it is the greatest of all evils of man to have knowledge of many things and nevertheless have no power to act."

These words, more than 2500 years old, express the military tragedy of Germany.

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\*\* Editor's note: The above is the exact translation of the title of the book as given in the German manuscript. It is not clear to which of General Fuller's books the author is referring.

2 April 1947

(signed): Rendulic  
Generaloberst



Observations of the Historical Commission

on the report by

Generaloberst Rendulic

"A Reflection on the Causes of the German Defeat"

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I. General der Infanterie Brennecke:

As the author rightfully stated in his introduction, much more can be said on this subject. Indeed, some valuable comments already have been made.

Two causes have been given as the ultimate reasons for losing the war:

The mistakes made by the High Command and the wrong employment of the manpower. This leads the author to the conclusion: "Germany has lost this war for purely military reasons".

This statement is apt to mislead the reader who is not familiar with all the facts. It could easily be interpreted to the disadvantage of the unblemished reputation of the German Armed Forces (Wehrmacht) and their commanders with the exception of the highest political military echelons. This would be dangerous.

That the war was lost for "military" reasons is an established fact. This military defeat however, has its deeper causes also in different domains.

II. Generalmajor Frhr. Ruedt von Collenberg:

In his introduction the author labels his report as "patchwork" and it can rightfully be called a "contribution" to the subject under discussion.

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A contribution, however, cannot lead to a conclusion like this: "Germany has lost the war for purely military reasons".

It is without doubt a task of greatest historical importance to illuminate the causes of the German defeat. But it cannot be solved in an off-hand fashion.

I hardly believe it very likely that the exhaustive investigations to come will result in the final judgment that we have lost the war for purely military reasons.

III. Generaloberst Raus:

No soldier of insight will doubt the grave mistakes made by the military High Command which are rightfully charged with being the main cause of the defeat. It is quite possible however, that similar mistakes have been made in other domains also, for instance in foreign policy, economical, psychological, and various other matters.

We have not yet gained a proper perspective to the events nor do we have a sufficiently comprehensive insight into all the circumstances to come to a conclusion today.

The report can therefore be evaluated only within the limitations of its title.

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Suggestion to paragraph 2: Germany has lost the war. The reasons for the defeat, as far as the military domain is concerned, must be sought primarily in blunders of the High Command and in the wrong use of the effective strength of the nation.