

will agree, however, that “only Horkheimer and Adorno offer a solution to the Jewish question as true heirs of Marx” (305). There may indeed be a mythological basis to faith in the Enlightenment and human progress, but as Zakai’s engaging, learned, and in many ways profound discourse on these five writers attests, without that faith, the alternative for mankind is dark indeed.

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The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader. By Stephen G. Fritz. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018. Pp. xvi + 459. Cloth \$30.00. ISBN 978-0300205985.

The widespread perception of Adolf Hitler as a military leader is clear: the corporal of the First World War, untrained in the higher art of the military profession, did not understand how to wage war or how to conduct military operations. This lack of competence was one of the main reasons why Germany lost the Second World War. Hitler’s political decisions overstretched the country’s economic and military abilities, and Hitler’s operational (and sometimes even tactical) decisions resulted in the eventual defeat of the Wehrmacht. To a large degree, this view was shaped by the extensive memoir literature by German generals published in the 1950s and 1960s. The arguments brought forward by the former generals seemed logical: How could an untrained political leader make sound military decisions? By making these arguments, the former military leadership of the Third Reich could also create the perfect scapegoat: if Hitler had not interfered in the military process, the Wehrmacht would have won the war. As is often the case, the reality was not this black and white. Against this background, Stephen Fritz assesses the role and success of Hitler as a military leader.

Fritz is an expert on the German army and the Nationalist Socialist state. Even a quick glance at the bibliography conveys the depth of his research and understanding of the darkest period of German history. It is particularly commendable that Fritz has used German sources and German literature extensively in his book. In an ideal world, this would not be worth mentioning—How can one write authoritatively about German history without being able to read German? Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world, and there are still far too many authors who engage with German history without the necessary language skills. The book is well written and presents complex matters and detail in an accessible manner, which cannot be said of every academic work.

Fritz adopts a chronological structure. In twelve chapters, he guides the reader from the “Emergence of the Idea” (the title of the second chapter) through the end of the war. The last chapter is an assessment of “Hitler as Feldherr.” Before embarking on this chronological journey, Fritz offers in the first chapter an overview of Hitler’s understanding of the philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz. This chapter offers a good and concise analysis of Clausewitz, and already at this stage Fritz argues that Hitler’s ideas and policies were not inconsistent but quite the opposite. In contrast to his generals, Hitler did not concentrate on the operational or (military) strategic aspects of the war, but was guided by policy, which, naturally, sprang from his particular worldview. Given Hitler’s goals, Fritz argues,

the Führer's strategic decisions were neither as illogical nor as irrational as his generals claimed after the war, and, as Fritz explains, Hitler's actions had the support of at least some key officers. At times, the generals also actively looked to Hitler to make difficult decisions. The key event here is the failure of the German attack on Moscow in December 1941 and the question of how to deal with the Soviet counteroffensive. Hitler has been criticized for the decision to stand and fight rather than retreat, but, as Fritz shows, this decision found support within the Wehrmacht's higher echelons because the alternative (a withdrawal to hastily prepared defensive positions) would not have offered much chance of success.

Fritz argues that Hitler had a clear view of his aims and possessed a keen strategic understanding, in particular of Germany's economic weakness. His understanding of military operations and logistics was more restricted, which is not surprising considering that he had never attended staff college. These areas were the realm of the military elite, and it was in the area of operations and tactics that the Wehrmacht impressed its enemies. Fritz concludes that one of Hitler's main failings was to combine these separate strengths into an effective command structure. Moreover, once the war turned defensive, Hitler's contributions to military operations became more of a hindrance than an advantage. This was, however, exactly the time when Hitler's distrust of his military leadership caused him to interfere not only in operational but also in tactical matters. His antipathy toward the general staff—a socially exclusive and elite caste closed to outsiders like he—meant that he increasingly distanced himself from their professional advice.

Clausewitz tells us that war is, ultimately, an instrument of policy and that every war has to return to policy. In this, Hitler followed Clausewitz more closely than his generals did. However, this is a reciprocal process; military actions and realities need to be taken into consideration when creating policies. And because these military realities shift and change, so must policy. Following his political convictions to the end was the eventual downfall of Hitler and thus also of Germany in the Second World War. As the war progressed, Fritz argues, Hitler unleashed his ideological goals and increasingly lost any willingness to be flexible in methods or to resort to political solutions. Hitler's political decisions were thus more important than his military ones or his meddling in military affairs, as the German generals argued in their writings after the war. Hitler the political and ideological Führer refused to allow Hitler the *Feldherr*, or military leader, any freedom of action; his decision to fight to the bitter end reflected political more than military considerations. This, in Fritz's assessment, was the biggest flaw in Hitler's approach to war, not his failings as military leader.

Overall, this is a highly relevant book. It presents Hitler and his contributions to the conduct of war in a new light, and it moves away from the common understanding of Hitler as a military leader. This book should therefore be read by everybody who has an interest in the Second World War, Hitler, and the Wehrmacht. But the book achieves more than a general reassessment of Hitler's role. The analysis of Hitler's leadership style, the ongoing discussions with the Army High Command, and the failure to establish a powerful and coherent chain of command in the Wehrmacht makes this book highly relevant for everybody with a professional interest in leadership and organization of large institutions.

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