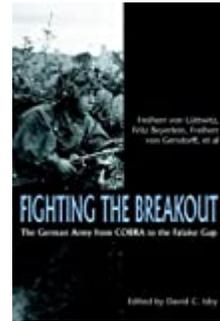


Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff, Paul Hausser. *Fighting the Breakout: The German Army in Normandy from "Cobra" to the Falaise Gap.* London and Mechanicsburg: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2004. 255 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-584-3.



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Still Fighting for the Myth: German Wehrmacht Officers' Reports for the U.S. Historical Division in the Context of the Historiography on the Allied Normandy Breakout

Christian von Gersdorff, writing in service of the U.S. Army Historical Division about his experience as Chief of Staff of the German Seventh Army in the months immediately following the Allied landing at Normandy in June, 1944, sums up the German dilemma in the following words: "Despite a frank and lucid estimate of the situation by the High Command of the German forces in the west, Supreme Command did not alter its decisions, though the overall situation was so obvious that no realistically thinking person could entertain any doubts. However, Supreme Command deceived itself and the German people with its belief in Providence. The overriding principle of command remained: 'We'll manage somehow'" (p. 19).[1] This illusionary perspective, certainly intensified by the attempted military coup of July 20, continued to determine the German High Command's practice until it was much too late to seek the "political solution" that a number of high-ranking Army commanding officers on the western front began to dare to recommend openly when it became clear that Allied forces had gained a foothold on the French coast.

Caught between the unrelentingly orthodox battle-

field ideology of the high command, the advancing Allied forces and, not least, their own professional ethos, German Army commanders in the West found themselves in a hopeless situation. This volume offers previously unpublished texts written by five of the major actors in this drama, thus providing interested readers with perhaps one of the most detailed accounts available in the English language of the German operations in reaction to the Allied advance after D-Day up to the destruction of the German defense of northern France in the Falaise pocket in August, 1944. It represents the eighth volume in a series the publisher calls "World War II German DebrieFs" which, to date, has made available previously unpublished accounts by German officers on tank warfare on the Eastern Front, the Afrika Korps, the Luftwaffe's response to Allied strategic bombing, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Ardennes Offensive. Reflecting American fascination with D-Day and the Allied invasion, this is the third book in a subseries covering the events from the Allied landing to the withdrawal of surviving German forces through the Falaise gap. This was a period of high drama for both Allied and German forces. Since the birth of the Allied coalition warfare strategy in 1941, the British and the Americans had been in disagreement as to when and how to attack the continent, making Operation Overlord a test of the coalition. The Germans had, of course, long awaited the cross-Channel attack,

some commanders fearing that any Allied foothold on the mainland, meaning the opening of a second front, would end in defeat for Germany. A debate raged between two schools of thought on operative practice, specifically on the best use of available tank forces and the most effective form of coastal defense and fortification.[2] Battlefield commanders realized that the German forces lacked adequate manpower, munitions and supplies, as well as the support of the other branches of the Wehrmacht, to continue to hold Normandy for very long.

The great bulk of the texts presented were written by Generalmajor Rudolf-Christoph von Gersdorff and SS-Obergruppenfuehrer and Generaloberst der Waffen-SS Paul Hausser.[3] These authors spark the interest of military historians for several reasons. First, not only were they commanders on the western front, but their command centers were caught in the Allied encirclement of the German Seventh Army by Falaise, where Gersdorff managed to lead troops through a small gap, preventing their capture, and Hausser was severely injured in the fighting. Using the captured war diaries, reports to the High Command, and other source material, including interviews with important actors, Hausser and Gersdorff were able to paint very detailed pictures of the course of events and the German decision-making process, providing a synthesized narrative that is very close to the source material. In addition, Gersdorff, as a representative of the oppositional forces in the German officers' corps that plotted to assassinate Hitler, and Hausser, as the father of and moving force behind the Waffen-SS, appear at first glance to represent two opposing perspectives.[4] However, the texts themselves reveal no such tensions and the attempt on Hitler's life is mentioned only peripherally.[5]

The editor of the series, David Isby, emphasizes the value of Gersdorff's and Hausser's writings in comparison to the very influential high commanders' memoirs of the 1950s and 1960s, and in this he is correct. Despite this insight, he makes no attempt to explain the context in which the documents published in this volume were written, a set of circumstances that goes a long way in explaining their sobriety and focus on operational and tactical detail.[6] This is an appreciable omission and a barrier to the proper historical interpretation of the material. For the authors of the studies reproduced here were prisoners of war or, later, paid employees of the U.S. Army, writing in the service of the "Operational History (German) Section" of the U.S. Army's Historical Division. Bernd Wegner has delineated the difficult situation of the authors of this series of over one thousand individual studies and has also presented a thor-

ough analysis of the spirit in which these German officers reported their experiences to their captors. Given that they were asked to record their roles in combat against the Allies and in response to the growing admiration of the Americans for the Wehrmacht's combat performance, the captive officers grasped the chance to perpetuate this recognition. The resulting texts constituted, as Wegner terms it, "erschriebene Siege" – "victories through writing." Former Generalstabschef des Heeres Generaloberst Franz Halder, who soon became the elder statesman of the project, in concert with the "control group" of former OKH commanders he put together as the project's supervisory board, was determined to ensure that the studies represented the Wehrmacht as purely and deeply professional, and extremely honorable. Within this context, the authors limited themselves to recounting chains of events and recording commanders' decisions, while at the same time avoiding any hint of criticism of the Wehrmacht as an institution.[7]

The volume presents a number of Gersdorff's thirty texts for the Historical Division, composed to outline the western army's defense of French territory after the Allied invasion of June 1944. As in Gersdorff's case, Hausser's texts represent a selection from a larger body of material concerning the fighting in Normandy. Isby has split Hausser's original text, covering the activities of the Seventh Army from July 7 to August 20, into six parts in order to intersperse these between the six Gersdorff chapters. These "B-series" texts (the title meaning that they were completed before July 1948) are complemented by earlier manuscripts of Historical Division's "A-series" (meaning they had already been translated into English by mid-1946) by General der Panzertruppe Heinrich Eberbach and General der Panzertruppe Heinrich Freiherr von Luetwitz, as well as a further "B-series" report by General der Artillerie Wilhelm Fahrmbacher. These additional accounts provide the perspectives of divisional and corps commanders who had particular roles to play in the German attempts to restrain the Allied attempt to break through German lines of defense along the Normandy coast. All of the texts presented are available in the Foreign Military Studies series RG 338 in the U.S. National Archives, and have been used by many English-speaking military historians for research on the Allied breakthrough. Those who wish to check the translations can refer to the original German texts housed at the Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv in Freiburg and listed along with all the other Historical Division studies in the ZA1 index.

In addition to the lack of contextualization, other in-

consistencies and omissions make the reports difficult for historians to use. Perhaps it is nitpicking to wish that the editor had provided more information on the B-Series and the aims of the overall historiography. Isby does not inform the reader about the dates of composition for the texts, nor does he indicate, aside from providing the series numbers in Gersdorff's list of sources, that Gersdorff availed himself not only of the war diary of the Seventh Army, but also of the Hausser and Eberbach texts in this volume as well as another by Luettwitz, when preparing the account published here. Because this volume presents material with such a high level of detail, readers might well have welcomed recommendations of solid historiographical writing and source material for further reading. In addition, General der Artillerie Wilhelm Fahrmbacher is consistently and carelessly misnamed "Fahrmacher," while General der Panzertruppen Heinrich Eberbach appears as "Hans." [8] This latter mistake, however, may have been adopted from the National Archive index; the Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv index lists Eberbach as "Hans," while the English-language subject index prepared by the Historical Division knows him as "Heinz." The editor has carefully noted the sources of the many maps interspersed in the text, but the quality of the reproductions leaves much to be desired. More than one appears without its key. The photographs used as illustrations, taken from the National Archives and a private collection, depict Allied and German weaponry and soldiers. Most images of German weaponry are Allied documentary photographs of tanks and arms captured or destroyed in Normandy. Regarding the Nazi-era line drawings reproduced to illustrate the situation of the German forces, one wonders if it serves any historical purpose to use images employing iconography and stylistic means typical for the Nazi depiction of German soldiers. In doing so, the volume perpetuates the myth of the "Frontsoldat" that Nazi and Wehrmacht propaganda were able to anchor in the German collective consciousness.

Does *Fighting the Breakout* represent an important addition to English-language published material available on the German operations between the Allied operation "Cobra" to the German withdrawal through the Falaise gap? It is certainly a major improvement over the journalistic imprecision and stylization in Paul Carrell's 1960 *Invasion—They're Coming!* (first English edition 1962, reissued 1984). In considerable contrast, but available only in German, Dieter Ose's *Entscheidung im Westen 1944. Der Oberbefehlshaber West und die Abwehr der Alliierten Invasion* (1982), a Cologne dissertation su-

pervised by Andreas Hillgruber and published in the Institute for Military History's series, is based on a much wider range of primary source material than was available to Gersdorff and Hausser, and provides an indispensable multi-perspective account of the events. If Ose's is the definitive account to date for reconstructing the German perspective, the most accessible narrative on this topic is to be found in the Institute for Military History's *Das Deutsche Reich in der Defensive. Strategischer Luftkrieg in Europa, Krieg im Westen und Ostasien 1943-1944/45* (2001), the seventh volume of the official German history of World War II, "Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg." Those who do not read German will have to wait until September, 2005, when this work is to appear in English translation as *The Strategic Air War in Europe and the War in the West and East Asia, 1943-1944/5*, edited by Horst Boog, Gerhard Krebs, and Detlef Vogel.

In the meantime, other global histories of the Second World War, particularly Gerhard L. Weinberg's and the operational perspective offered by Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, do a fine job of indicating the overall significance of the Allied overcoming of German defenses in Normandy from the perspective of both sides while at the same time providing readers with a certain depth of detail. [9] The official histories of the three participant Allied nations, although written in the 1960s without the benefit of important source material, were nonetheless able to incorporate some German sources, and thus the German perspective, and are still today, along with the "Germany and the Second World War" series, important starting-points for research on combat operations. [10] The level of detail offered in Ose's monograph on "The Decision in the West" is matched from the American perspective by the volumes in Normandy and Northern France on the U.S. Army series on the "Campaigns of World War II" issued by the U.S. Army Center for Military History. Other classic studies which, among other themes, treat the Allied breakout in Normandy stem from Ralph Bennett, Russell F. Weigley, and Carlo D'Este. [11]

Thus, despite a great deal of fine literature, we must acknowledge a deficit of English-language detailed operational studies on the German army's struggle in Normandy in the late summer of 1944. Isby's series clearly serves its purpose, providing interested readers with a magnified view of German battlefield decision-making under extreme duress. Nonetheless, it seems inadvisable to recommend this volume for use by readers who have not mastered the finer points of Wehrmacht historiography. As do the memoirs of higher commanders, these

texts elevate the conflict between commanding officers on the front and those of the High Command as well as Hitler to an ideological level. Although those conflicts did exist, they represent, first, the inevitable difficulties in communication between theoreticians and practitioners forced to cooperate in war and, second, the Wehrmacht's fixation on operational analysis and practice to the extent that intelligence, personnel, and logistical considerations were not drawn upon in high-level decision making processes.[12] In other words, it is more a reflection of the mythification of the German Army's officers' corps when these conflicts are interpreted as this group's fundamental political disagreement with the Nazi war aims, even from the standpoint of those officers who plotted to assassinate Hitler after they realized that German defeat was inevitable. As Wegner points out, this shortsighted perspective long dominated German historiography of the Second World War, and is still to be found in more recent studies.[13] Christian Gerlach and, in a more thorough fashion, Johannes Huerter have recently explored the involvement of Oberstleutnant Henning von Tresckow's insurrectionary circle in the genocide of the European Jews and war crimes against Soviet civilians and prisoners of war on the Eastern Front, while many of these men were part of the General Staff of the Army Group Center. Gersdorff himself was the Group's General Staff intelligence officer (Ic) and thus responsible for contact to the SS-Einsatzgruppen. Huerter, an historian at the Munich Institute for Contemporary History who is not one to engage in rash Wehrmacht-bashing as a matter of principle, comes to the conclusion that Tresckow and his circle were by no means fundamentally opposed to Hitler's decision to attack the Soviet Union, and that they were well-informed of and corroborative in the earliest mass murders of Jewish civilians. National-conservative anti-communism, feelings of racial and cultural superiority, and outright anti-Semitism made the initial crimes against humanity appear less horrific when weighed against the chance to strike at the heart of the Soviet Union. Only when it became apparent that the military risk had not paid off and the mass murders took on genocidal dimension did ethical second thoughts come to play a role for the young staff officers of the Army Group Center.[14] In contrast, *Fighting the Breakout* seems to build on the supposed tension created by confronting Gersdorff's texts with those of Waffen-SS-man Hausser, as the introduction makes a particular point of mentioning the former's involvement in the assassination plot.

Another specter raised by *Fighting the Breakout* is the issue of allegedly weak Allied combat performance

in Normandy due to an overly cautious, by-the-book approach and lack of bravado in leadership. German officers, writing both as prisoners of war for the Americans (as did Gersdorff and Hausser) and as veterans musing over past accomplishments in private memoirs, long made this assertion and contrasted it with what they perceived as the superior heroic sacrificial will of German troops, a perspective that has passed down into a great deal of subsequent historical writing. Dieter Ose's study of the "decision in the West," for example, touts German "heart" over the Allies' mass of sheer material strength (which may remind the sensitive reader of the contemporary German awe of the de-humanized Soviet "Dampfwalze" advancing towards the German border in 1944), while Martin van Creveld and Richard Overy also have emphasized Allied material superiority in the face of German operational and tactical brilliance. Even today, the professional "Schneid" of the German officer radiates great appeal not only for German historians, but also for many military historians in other nations. This swash-buckling style of combat leadership offers an apparently admirable model for military manliness, while at the same time postulating itself as the be-all and end-all of Wehrmacht soldierliness. In this autistic professionalist view, the political, ideological, and general cultural dimensions of German combat practice during World War II remain unexamined.

Incidentally, American historians have recently attempted to improve the reputation of the American infantry forces in Europe, often arguing with an almost equal amount of certainty for their own military's cultural superiority.[15] Russell Hart has contributed a more balanced account that weighs the long-term learning curves of the German, American, British, and Canadian forces as the setting for their respective short-term capacity to adjust to western theater combat conditions in Normandy in the summer of 1944, and in doing so, explores the source material in great detail.[16] Other recent American studies mirror the German military perspective, in that they explore and compare Allied and German "field-grade" commanders and operations in Normandy within the framework of case-studies for the U.S. military as a learning institution, thus meeting the needs of that institution to learn from past experience.[17] At the same time, they fail to provide the adequate contextualization that other historians expect and that represents the very element that makes military history more than a highly specialized discipline, but rather a field accessible and fruitful for a wider community of scholars.

As the book's editor states (p. 9), these texts are by no means the only important primary sources available on the Allied invasion in Normandy and its consequences for the German armed forces, nor are they of any sensational significance among the array of available materials. Furthermore, historians sensitive to the wider cultural implications of wartime operational practices will do well to confine their reading neither to eye-witness accounts, such as those in this series, nor to historical studies limited to combat operations such as Ose's. Such historians will recognize the need to extend the field of vision to include long-term structural developments and the wider-scale cultural impact of warfare, and to seek a more complete range of information, perhaps by exploring the role of German western front commanders in supporting and sustaining the German war of conquest and annihilation or the construction of historical myths around the Wehrmacht that started with much of the writings in the Historical Division studies, or by considering German operational and tactical traditions and practices within the context of their historical development since the nineteenth century, as Hart and, most recently, Isabel Hull have done.[18]

Notes

[1]. Generalmajor Rudolf-Christoph Freiherr von Gersdorff became, as of July 28, Chief of Staff of the Seventh Army, promoted from his previous position as Chief of the LXXXII Armeekorps when von Kluge, then Seventh Army Oberbefehlshaber, sought a new man for this position after the Allied breakthrough at St. Lo.

[2]. The development of the German defense strategy against the anticipated Allied invasion is covered by a volume in the German Institut for Military History's publication series: Hans Wegmueller, *Die Abwehr der Invasion. Die Konzeption des Oberbefehlshabers West 1940-1944* (Freiburg: Rombach, 1979). For the American perspective, see the official U.S. Army history: Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare: 1943-1944. United States Army in World War II. War Department* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1999 [1959]). For the British point of view, see J. R. M. Butler and J. M.A. Gwyer, *Grand Strategy. Volumes II and III. United Kingdom Military Series. History of the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957 and 1964).

[3]. SS-Obergruppenfuehrer and Generaloberst der Waffen-SS Paul Hausser became Oberbefehlshaber of the Seventh Army on July 29th, replacing Gener-

aloberst Friedrich Dollmann and was made Oberstgruppenfuehrer and Generaloberst der Waffen-SS on 1st August.

[4]. For a helpful portrait of Hausser, see Mark P. Gingerich's biographical sketch in Ronald Smelser and Enrico Syring, eds., *Die Militaerelite des Dritten Reiches. 27 biographische Skizzen* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1995), pp. 223-235.

[5]. Gersdorff provided the Historical Division with two accounts of the failed coup of June 20, which are available in the Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv in Freiburg via the ZA1 index.

[6]. However, the editor's introduction of the preceding volume of the series, *Fighting the Invasion: The German Army at D-Day* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), covers some of this terrain in its introduction. This is admirable, but does not help the reader who pulls only *Fighting the Breakout* from the stacks.

[7]. Bernd Wegner, "Erschriebene Siege. Franz Halder, die 'Historical Division' und die Rekonstruktion des Zweiten Weltkrieges im Geiste des deutschen Generalstabes," in *Politischer Wandel, organisierte Gewalt und nationale Sicherheit. Beitrage zur neueren Geschichte Deutschlands und Frankreichs. Festschrift fr Klaus-Juergen Mueller*, eds. Ernst Willi Hansen, Gerhard Schreiber and Bernd Wegner (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1995), pp. 291-293. In the early 1950s, while the U.S. Army was still commissioning studies from former Wehrmacht officers, Oberst a.D. Hermann Teske, formerly of the OKH General Staff, established an alternative series called "Die Wehrmacht in Kampf" ("The Wehrmacht in Battle") issued by the Heidelberg publisher Kurt Vonwinckel's "Scharnhorst Buchkameradschaft der Soldaten" that specialized in commemorative accounts of important events and institutions in the Wehrmacht's short history written by involved commanding officers. Volume 2 of the series, Friedrich Hayn's *Die Invasion. Von Cotenin bis Falaise* (1954), which can be seen as a parallel text to Gersdorff's and Hausser's accounts and was written by the former intelligence officer of the Seventh Army's LXXXIV Army Corps, is an indication of to what extent the conditions set by the Historical Division prevented its authors from indulging in the flights of pathos to be found in the popular, less detailed accounts in the many volumes of the "Wehrmacht in Kampf" series.

[8] Their correct identifications: General der Panzertruppe Heinrich Eberbach, from July 4th to August 23rd Oberbefehlshaber der Panzergruppe West (as of

August 5th known as the Fifth Panzer-Armee), replacing General der Panzertruppe Leo Freiherr von Geyr, and Oberbefehlshaber of the Panzergruppe Ebersbach; General der Panzertruppe Heinrich Freiherr von Luetwitz, Generalkommandeur of the Second Panzerdivision; General der Artillerie Wilhelm Fahrmbacher, Generalkommandeur of the XXVth Armeekorps, on June 28th named Oberbefehlshaber of the Seventh Army, replacing Hausser.)

[9]. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[10]. Martin Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit. Vol. 6, The European Theater of Operations: United States Army in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1993 [1961]), in concert with Alfred M. Beck et al., *The Corps of Engineers: The War against Germany. The Technical Services. United States Army in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1985); L. F. Ellis et al., *The Battle of Normandy. Vol. 1, Victory in the West* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1993 [1962]); C. P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945. Vol. 3, Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War* (Ottawa: The Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, 1960).

[11]. Ralph Bennett, *Ultra in the West: The Normandy Campaign, 1944-45* (London: Hutchinson, 1979); Russell F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants: The Campaign in France and Germany, 1944-1945* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1981); and Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy: The Unwritten Story of Montgomery and the Allied Campaign* (New York: Perennial, 1983).

[12]. For a thorough study of the German high command that synthesizes a great deal of German-language research, see Geoffrey P. Megargee, *Inside Hitler's High Command* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

[13]. Ose's study could certainly be mentioned in this context. Wegner, p. 291.

[14]. Christian Gerlach, "Hitlergegner bei der Heeresgruppe Mitte und die 'verbrecherische Befehle,'" in *NS-Verbrechen und der militaerische Widerstand gegen Hitler*, ed. Gerd R. Ueberschaer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000), pp. 62-76; and Joannes Huerter, "Auf dem Weg zur Militaeropposition. Tresckow, Gersdorff, der Vernichtungskrieg und der Judenmord. Neue Dokumente ber das Verhaeltnis der Heeresgruppe Mitte zur Einsatzgruppe B im Jahr 1941," *Vierteljahreshefte fuer Zeitgeschichte* 52, no. 3 (2004): pp. 527- 562. In his article, Huerter demonstrates that Gersdorff's post-war insistence that he had opposed the OKW's infamous "criminal orders" at the outset of Operation Barbarossa did not reflect the facts of the matter. For Gersdorff's myth-building statements, on which much later writing on the resistance movement is based, see Rudolf-Christian Freiherr von Gersdorff, *Soldat im Untergang* (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, and Vienna: Ullstein, 1977).

[15]. See for example, John Sloan Brown's *Draftee Division: The 88th Infantry Division in World War II* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986) and to a less pronounced extent Peter R. Mansoor's *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999); and Robert Sterling Rush, *Hell in Huertgen Forest: The Ordeal and Triumph of an American Infantry Regiment* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001). Peter Schrijvers' *The Crash of Ruin: American Combat Soldiers in Europe during World War II* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998) provides another perspective on the long-term impact of American soldiers' experience in occupied Europe, in that it probes the mentality of the U.S. infantryman and how it guided his developing interpretations of his European experience.

[16]. Russell A. Hart, *Clash of Arms: How the Allies Won in Normandy* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2001).

[17]. James Jay Carafano, *After D-Day: Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout* (Boulder: Rienner, 2000).

[18]. Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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