

Peter Joachim Lapp. *General bei Hitler und Ulbricht: Vincenz Müller - Eine deutsche Karriere.* Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2003. 286 S. EUR 24.90 (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-86153-286-6.



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A Biography of Twentieth-Century Germany?

When writing a biography it is difficult to resolve the problem of emphasis. Should the author pay more attention to the personality or to the wider environment and impact of the subject's life? This biography covers the life of General Vincenz Müller and while his story is maintained throughout the book, it seems easy to downplay his life and instead emphasize the wider themes and events in German history. A look at the sources uncovers good reasons why such an approach seems necessary in this case. Lapp used the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Potsdam) and the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr (Dresden) along with the Stasi archive in Berlin. This approach is coupled with numerous interviews of important characters like Eveline Wunderlich (Müller's long-time mistress) and several military comrades (such as Helmut Ritter). The endnotes display the wealth of source material Lapp used and adds to the authority of his story line; however, the overall predominance of archival sources forces the story to define Müller less as a person and more in terms of his circumstances. The few glimpses into his private life beg the reader to ask what Müller was thinking and not just abstractly reflecting on who he spoke with or where he was stationed.

This situation is not as apparent towards the end of the book, when the sources (interviews like that from Eveline Wunderlich) allow for more personal insights.

The biography does a fine job of chronicling Müller's life while discussing some of the major events that defined him. The book moves rapidly through a description of his military service during the First World War. The narrative picks up steam after WWI and the reader begins to get a sense of Müller's unique career. He remained in the service during the interwar period and finally saw real promotion directly prior to and during the Second World War. While his position remained rather static for quite some time as Chief of Staff of the 17th Army (Eastern Front), he took overall command of the 4th Army (Army Group Center) in July, 1944. If his career would bring glory in battle, 1944 was surely too late for him to make a difference against overwhelming odds. Upon engaging the Red Army he surrendered in view of the awesome odds against him. Müller contemplated the loss of lives that would occur if he continued action against the Red Army. Lapp states, "Vincenz Müller rettete damit Zehntausenden das Leben (einige Schätzungen sprechen

sogar von 50 000). Nach dem Krieg bezeichnete er diesen Befehl als den besten, den er je in seiner militärischen Laufbahn gegeben habe" (p. 140). Unlike so many other German servicemen, Müller was not doomed by his surrender to execution or long-term imprisonment.

Müller's knack for knowing influential people appears repeatedly throughout the work. Lapp discusses the influence, prior to WWII, of General Schleicher on Müller and his development as a soldier (importantly, as a politically savvy soldier). He later carried on a friendship with Field Marshal Paulus after meeting him in Soviet captivity and through the Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland. The post-war world again treated Müller well. Despite his reputation as a "fascist" officer, Müller became Chief of the General Staff of the Nationale Volksarmee (NVA) in 1956.

Oftentimes biographical information seems overwhelmed by the general history of the times. While the reader is reminded of Müller's actions or encounters, the volume reads very much like a German history from about 1913 until 1961. This is not necessarily a negative trait; however, at certain points one might wonder if Müller was sprinkled into the narrative at times to keep the focus rather than as the center of attention. Furthermore, a few instances occur where certain facts about his life are mentioned but with seemingly little relevance. For example, Lapp says, "Im Mrz 1939 konnte Müller, inzwischen mit seiner Familie in Frankfurt am Main, Schumannstrae 65 wohnhaft, noch einmal für vier Wochen in Urlaub an die italienische Riviera fahren. Es sollte für lange Zeit sein letzter gewesen sein" (p. 60). This sentence concludes the paragraph and chapter with the reader asking why the author included this piece about his vacation in Italy without mentioning what he did or who he talked to. Did he meet with any Italian officers while on holiday or did he write anything in a diary during the trip that foreshadowed the grim future?

Regarding how the work fits into interpretations of German history, several points become apparent. Lapp states, "Während sich die Wehrmacht im Westfeldzug im allgemeinen an das Kriegsvölkerrecht hielt, sollte das im anstehenden Kampf gegen den 'jüdischen Bolschewismus' nicht mehr der Fall sein; von vornherein wurde die Truppe darauf orientiert, im Gegner einen Feind zu sehen, der zu vernichten sei und bei dem jede Rücksichtnahme von Belieben" (p. 72). This conclusion falls in line with Omer Bartov's argumentation in *Hitler's Army*. Bartov argues plainly that for the Wehrmacht, "it is in this [the Wehrmacht as an army of the people and tool of the regime] manner too that the connection recently

emphasized between the Wehrmacht's criminal conduct in the East and the extermination of the Jews should be understood, whether we speak of the generals or the privates." [1] Bartov is not cited, however, although other scholarship that stands in line with much of what Bartov cites is referenced by Lapp (e.g., Christian Streit and Horst Boog). The kind of rhetoric that came out of the Nazi regime emphasized the dehumanization of the Soviet soldier and compelled, at best, a lack of compassion and at worst, outright brutality towards the Red Army and the peoples of the Soviet Union. Bartov makes this case along with others, and Lapp lends support to that thesis.

Significantly, this interpretation of the Wehrmacht is not confined merely to historical studies. In political science, Eliot Cohen notes the trend to see the Wehrmacht as imbued with ideology making it not only a better fighting force, but also helping maintain tactical effectiveness. [2] This trend towards seeing ideology as a major factor in the Wehrmacht's performance stems from relatively new, more complete views of life in Nazi Germany. Several studies of the post-war development of the Bundeswehr address this issue in terms of the historical legacy of the Wehrmacht. Without getting too far afield, while it remains hotly debated, the army can serve as a good center for study for this phenomenon, especially on the Eastern Front, as soldiers (many of whom were not party members) were inundated with propaganda and news that extolled a sense of duty that oftentimes bridged the gap with criminality. Müller's role here corresponds to this viewpoint. Lapp mentions that Müller failed to take appropriate notice of the atrocities: "über die Pogrome gegen die Juden fand sich kein Wort in diesem Papier [Kriegstagebuch]" (p. 83). Moreover, the overall treatment of Müller is negative: "Müller hat wie viele andere auch soldatisches Pflichtgefühl und militärische Professionalität über moralische Bedenken gestellt" (p. 73).

Lapp also hints that the policies of the Third Reich progressed over time. For example, "Mit diesem Mord [an Schleicher liessen] die Nazis ihre letzte Maske fallen. Was am 30. Juni 1934 geschah, öffnete den Weg in ein Terrorssystem, an dessen Ende der Holocaust stand" (p. 54). Furthermore, during the war the kind of brutality on the Eastern Front seemed a logical step from prior actions by the government in dealing with enemies. Lapp mentions the comparison of the wartime campaign against Bolshevism with the open-ended asocial categorization used to round up domestic, non-Jewish enemies: "Der Reichskanzler und Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht [Hitler] setzte den Bolschewismus mit asozialem Verbrechen

gleich und forderte, vom Standpunkt des soldatischen Kameradentums abzurcken" (p. 72).

Overall, the book contributes to a contemporary understanding of modern Germany during the first six decades of the twentieth century. Lapp has traced the life of Vincenz Mller through this tumultuous time. Though his name is not a familiar one in German military history, Mller's significance is brought out through a chronology of meaningful associations and key positions of authority. The beginning of the book would have benefitted from a more thorough view of his private life. The title of the book claims that Mller's career is a German one, no doubt since he worked (as a good careerist) for "Germany" for most his life. Germany underwent dramatic change during Mller's lifetime and while not always se-

cure in maintaining credible connections to its protagonist, the book shows his relevance to modern German military history while supporting some of the most recent scholarship.

Notes

[1]. Omer Bartov, *Hitler's Army* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 10. Bartov makes reference to G. Hirschfeld, ed., *The Policies of Genocide: Jews and Soviet Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986).

[2]. Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002), p 243.

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