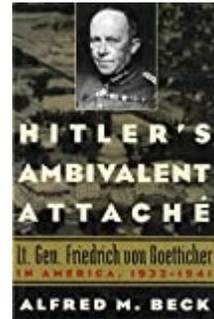




Alfred M. Beck. *Hitler's Ambivalent Attaché: Lt General Friedrich von Boetticher in America, 1933-1941.* Washington: Potomac Books, 2005. xv + 323 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57488-877-5; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57488-878-2.



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Published on H-German (March, 2007)

A Man on a Self-Imposed Mission

Sometimes it seems hard to remember that, between Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933 and the German declaration of war in December 1941, the United States and Germany maintained a diplomatic relationship. That these diplomatic relations form the centerpiece of Alfred Beck's investigation into Boetticher's life and career is one of many benefits of this densely researched and densely written biography of National Socialist Germany's military attaché in Washington.

In its earliest incarnation, Beck's study was to investigate the accuracy of Boetticher's assessment of the American military, especially as, according to Beck, published sources such as the *Documents of German Foreign Policy* tend to draw attention to those of Boetticher's reports that perused anti-Semitic language and were dismissive of American industrial potential. To be sure, Beck attributes this skewed emphasis to the "necessity of selecting representative documents" and not to any prejudicial intent (p. x). Indeed, Beck makes a very valid point when he stresses that the very availability of voluminous official material on Boetticher allows for a much more nuanced evaluation of Boetticher's reports

from Washington than the account that has found its way into the historiography by way of selectively published sources. Over the course of his research, Beck also had the good fortune to locate additional material on Boetticher's life and career. He was contacted by Boetticher's kin when the erstwhile military attaché's private papers became available and facilitated their eventual transfer to the German Military Archives in Freiburg (p. xi). Beck also conducted interviews and corresponded with people who knew Boetticher throughout his life, which provided some insight into Boetticher's private universe.

As a consequence, a project that began as a narrow study of accuracy in scholarly assessment turned into a full-scale biography of Boetticher. This book is, however, not a biography for biography's sake. Rather, Beck emphasizes that the study of Boetticher, a secondary character at best, even in Germany's embassy in Washington, "permits a glimpse into the sociology of a conservative caste at once assailed by the politics of the regime and the impossibilities imposed on it, its weaknesses in resisting its evils, and its eventual failure to present any alternative to National Socialism's illusory attractions" (p. xiii).

In short: Beck has set his sights higher than an ordinary biography of one man.

The book consists of nine chapters delineating Boetticher's life and career in interesting and only infrequently overwhelming detail. Chapters 1 and 2 trace Boetticher's early life and career, from a slightly unusual family background that left him fluent in English due to an "American-born and British-bred" mother, through his early military career during the Great War and post-war association with Wilhelm Groener, who influenced Boetticher's career in the immediate aftermath of the German defeat. Beck also discusses Boetticher's trajectory in the Weimar Republic, tracing his movement from chief of T-3, the Foreign Army Office, to a position at the League of Nations in Geneva and eventually to his assignment as military attaché in Washington in the waning days of the republic. These chapters persuade through their detailed descriptions of Boetticher's roles and activities and help to locate the man in his times. Boetticher clearly appears as a traditional military man with an at-best ambiguous relationship to the Weimar Republic.

Most interesting is Beck's investigation of Boetticher's writings. While these writings reveal many of the conservative sentiments one would expect, such as an anti-French agenda, a wish for German resurgence and admiration of German military geniuses such as Frederick the Great, to whom Boetticher attributed divine inspiration, they do show a thoughtful, deeply conservative man able to put pen to paper. Of particular interest in light of Boetticher's later appointment to Washington is his often confirmed belief that Germany should actively pursue good relations with the United States. Thus, it is not a surprise that when the Five Power Declaration of December 1932 granted Germany equal rights in a system meant to provide security for all nations, Boetticher was tapped for the position of military attaché. He came unusually well-equipped: fluent in English, he had over the years, and sometimes to the chagrin of his superiors, established good relations with American military personnel. As early as 1922, Boetticher visited the United States at the invitation of the War Department.

The change of the political guard in Germany between Boetticher's appointment in late 1932 and his eventual departure in the spring of 1933 did not affect his appointment as military attaché at all. At this point, the new National Socialist government left diplomatic matters to diplomats and military matters to military men, who worked out real and imagined problems amongst themselves. Shortly before his departure to the

United States in the spring of 1933, though, Boetticher requested an audience with Reich President Paul von Hindenburg, on whose staff he had served in 1915 and under whose sway he had fallen at that time. Boetticher invested this meeting with almost mythic qualities in the years to come, claiming that Hindenburg had personally instructed Boetticher to do "all in his power to establish and maintain terms of confidence between the United States and Germany" (p. 50). Incidentally, it is not even certain whether this meeting took place, but Boetticher clearly came to see it as the cornerstone of his activities in the upcoming years. In that sense, he might indeed be a good example of a "conservative cast." In his own mind, Boetticher was serving an imagined Hindenburg who symbolized an imagined German tradition, even after the man was long dead and Hitler had usurped all powers.

Chapters 3 to 7 then focus on Boetticher's time and activities in the United States. A man on a self-imposed mission, Boetticher saw his task as influencing American public opinion on Germany and, in particular, as a struggle for the "soul of the American military" (p. 60). In short order, Boetticher fell in with a decidedly pro-German or at least strongly isolationist crowd, which only fostered his belief that he could sway opinions, even if he sometimes misread warmth for agreement, as in his initial meeting with the army's Chief of Staff, General Douglas MacArthur. Boetticher's acumen as a Civil War historian certainly aided his standing among military men and leading historians, such as Douglas Southall Freeman, with whom he established a lasting friendship. Boetticher saw these men as conduits for his mission of countering French influences and establishing German military tradition as a criterion among Americans for interpreting world affairs. Most importantly, Boetticher hoped to stress the "identity between the United States and Germany with himself as the bridge between the two" (p. 71); eventually, this mission took on an almost religious fervor (p. 51).

The core of Boetticher's assignment in Washington was the collection of material on the American military. Boetticher's evaluations show the breadth and scope of a dedicated and well-connected observer who saw apparent weaknesses, but did not demean American potential. Indeed, Beck found Boetticher's assessments to be largely accurate and, in that context, he appears to discount the anti-Semitic statements that gained such prominence in the published documents. While Boetticher was certainly not the only non-Nazi anti-Semite, either in Nazi Germany or in the United States for that matter, Beck's

description of Boetticher as “apolitical” (p. 97) appears questionable and poorly supported. At the end of the day, Boetticher served Nazi Germany in a fairly prominent position.

In this context, two trips to Berlin shed an interesting light on Boetticher’s politics. In 1936, his son, who was living in Germany, was indicted for “preparation for treason.” Boetticher’s son had a penchant for writing “thinly-veiled political verse,” which he read in Berlin bistros, and had kept up “frank correspondence with...friends who had emigrated” from Germany to Switzerland (p. 103). Eventually, and with the help of Boetticher, who was attending meetings in Berlin that summer, the charges were quashed. Threatened with sterilization for psychiatric reasons, Boetticher’s son joined his family in the United States. There is absolutely no indication as to what Boetticher thought about the charges brought against his only son or how he reacted to the threat to his son’s manhood and the family’s lineage. It is hard to fathom that he concurred with Nazi justice in this particular case, but there is no evidence in either direction.

A second trip to Berlin in February 1939 presumably led to a meeting with Hitler, which, according to colleagues in the embassy in Washington, left Boetticher positively enthralled. Boetticher’s postwar recollections do not dwell on a meeting with Hitler during this visit, but rather stress his acquaintance with traditional military men and the old diplomatic guard, like Ludwig Beck and Ernst von Weizsäcker. He insinuates that he was asked to report inaccurately from Washington to help to avoid war. However, Boetticher was not willing to “engage in such holy subterfuge” (p. 130). If Boetticher ever had any concerns about Nazi Germany’s path, they certainly did not impede his understanding of professionalism and his devoted service to it.

It is remarkable that all through his stay in the United States, Boetticher managed to maintain a good working relationship with his American colleagues, especially in the American General Staff and the War Department. Beck even suggests that Boetticher had some influence in the United States Army. Presumably, Boetticher’s determination not to engage in illegal activities (that is, espionage) helped matters tremendously. Relations grew more difficult after the German attack on Poland, but Boetticher managed to prevail. Indeed, between August 1940 and August 1941, Boetticher provided the War Department with detailed reports on German air operations directed against Britain. For Boetticher, the benefits of this arrangement were two-fold. Not only did it help him

cast doubt on British reports, but he also retained access to American military intelligence, which allowed him to bolster what he could find on American preparedness in open sources.

In the end, though, it appears that Boetticher’s clear view of American military preparedness was hampered by two misconceptions. First, he wrote off Britain, and it appears that Hitler liked this assessment (p. 167). Second, he continued to focus on an isolationist viewpoint, even as American public opinion was slowly shifting and his erstwhile American contacts were losing political importance. Most importantly, the United States was reaching the magic point in mid-1941, at which, based on Boetticher’s accurate assessments, American defense production would begin to match defense needs in a great war. It appears that Hitler looked quite favorably on some of Boetticher’s assessments, namely those with which he agreed, and chose to ignore the ones that projected eventual American preparedness rather precisely. This approach was quite in character for Hitler and served many intelligence men as the perfect, postwar fig leaf when claiming innocence.

Beck devotes the last two chapters to Boetticher’s life upon his return to Germany in the aftermath of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war. Upon arrival in Berlin, he was awarded a medal by Hitler and eventually found himself as a high-level intelligence analyst producing reports on a broad matter of subjects including the problems and direction of the Allies, issues pertaining to the anticipated “second front,” the air war against Germany and new weapons technology (p. 201). While his reports were apparently read in the German High Command, Boetticher appears very much as an analyst-at-large kept busy by his superiors, even if they did on occasion read his reports.

For my taste, Beck tries too hard to find a connection between Boetticher and the conspirators of July 20, 1944. Beck clearly states that there was none, but he seems to be slightly baffled by this, as Boetticher appears to fit the profile so well. Beck proposes that Boetticher, while working as an analyst and void of any actual influence, might have participated in the (in-)famous “internal immigration,” but even that appears to be a stretch. At the end of the day, he soldiered on wherever his government put him. In that sense, then, Boetticher should not be considered “apolitical,” but rather wrapped up in an unquestioning loyalty to authority that made him very political.

Boetticher surrendered on April 30, 1945, and spent

the next two years in detention, fashioning himself as a traditional military man and the foremost *Amerika-Kenner* among his peers, who was loyal to the German and to the American cause (p. 213). He lived until 1967, writing and speaking on military history. In his conclusion, which also discusses the latter years of Boetticher's life, Beck draws attention yet again to the contrast between the failure of Boetticher's self-imposed mission and the accuracy of his technical reporting (p. 224). His technical abilities did not mean that he read the developing war accurately, as he clearly misunderstood the consequences of the German failure to bring a victorious end to its campaigns in Europe. In addition, Boetticher's reliance on people highly critical of President Franklin Roosevelt and all he stood for, including Jews in the government, seriously skewed his understanding of the direction the United States was about to take and only enhanced his increasingly unrealistic reading of the political situation in his host country.

Beck cannot answer the ultimate question—as to how much Boetticher's reports influenced Hitler's decision-making—conclusively. He suggests, however, that Boetticher might have indeed influenced Hitler's timing with his emphasis on the temporary limits of American readiness. Boetticher also might have enhanced his own sta-

tus with Hitler through his ready and fluent use of anti-Semitic verbiage. Even if we accept Beck's assessment that he did not really mean it, Boetticher surely knew that it would serve him and the reception of his reports well.

Beck has written a fine, ambitious book that persuades through the density of its research. On occasion, Beck seems to be slightly too sympathetic to his subject, but that appears to be the price devoted biographers pay. In the end, Beck sees Boetticher not “as a proponent...of Nazi ideology but of an older system of the Imperial German Army and its vestiges under von Seeckt: a superb technical proficiency often divorced from political feasibility or reality” (p. 231). I am not sure that Beck completely convinced me with his argument, although it is strong. Consequently, this book, although not quite the biography with the broad sociological implications for which I had hoped, is a fine addition to the existing literature on pre-1941 diplomatic relations between the United States and Germany, a fascinating glimpse into prewar Washington, an interesting read on the role of military attachés and an engaging investigation into the role and conduct of a high-ranking, but second-row military official, his worldview and justification, in Nazi Germany.

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Citation: Katrin Paehler. Review of Beck, Alfred M., *Hitler's Ambivalent Attaché: Lt General Friedrich von Boetticher in America, 1933-1941*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12978>

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