



Johannes Hürter. *Hitlers Heerführer: Die deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941/42.* München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2006. 719 Seiten. EUR 49.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-57982-6.

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They Were Hitler's Generals

They were his contemporaries, shared his anti-communism and—even if not to the same degree—his antisemitism.[1] They experienced Germany's surrender in World War I and the turmoil that gripped the country in its aftermath as traumatic, life-altering events that shattered their world. They were the twenty-five generals who led the Wehrmacht in Adolf Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. After the end of World War II, when military tribunals tried them as suspected war criminals, they defended their actions by shifting the blame for the killings of millions of Soviet Russian prisoners of war, civilians, and Jews to the dictator. Later, they perpetuated the myth of their own powerlessness in the face of Nazi terror with the (unwitting) help of the U.S. Army's Historical Division's Foreign Military Studies, which employed them to write about the German war effort on all fronts—especially in the East. The challenge for an author of another book about this group of much-studied and -publicized generals—among them famous names such as Heinz Guderian, Erich von Manstein, Fedor von Bock, Günther von Kluge, Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Walter Model, and Friedrich Paulus—is to offer a fresh perspective and to present new research to contribute to a better understanding of their motives.

With *Hitlers Heerführer*, Johannes Hürter has accomplished just that. He studies the motives of these army leaders as a group biography. Hürter's examination begins with a narrative about the generals' social background, education, career path, war experience, and relationship to the National Socialist regime. Having

acquainted the reader with the personalities in the first three chapters, Hürter changes methodology and devotes the following five chapters to different thematic aspects of the war in the East. He explains the Wehrmacht leaders' war aims and preparations, attitudes toward the peoples of the Soviet Union, as well as Hitler's criminal orders concerning the treatment of the land and its inhabitants. The next sections deal with operations, treatment of different groups of combatants and of the civilian population, and finally the murder of the Jews in German-occupied Soviet territory.

Hürter bases his group biography on meticulous research and evaluation of the generals' personal papers and diaries and extensive review of secondary literature about them. He combines common experiences and individual deviations to explain to the reader how the Prussian officer corps recruited its new members from among the offspring of "desired circles" (p. 27) such as officer and higher officials' families. Their upbringing and schooling made them natural standard-bearers for the elitist belief that the Prussian army was the institution on which the state was built. When the Great War ended, this group of future Eastern Front commanders lost more than the kaiser, whom they had served loyally. They also lost their role in society and moral compass, leaving only their military craft as safe haven. During the Weimar years of imposed disarmament, they advanced as best they could, but more than one of them felt desperate about his future. The ambitious rhetoric and audacious rearmament program of new chancellor Hitler promised

to end their nightmare.

By the time Hitler's regime decided to invade the Soviet Union, all twenty-five general officers had been promoted to positions in the Wehrmacht general staff. Most had participated in the victorious campaigns against Poland and France, and their grateful *Führer* had rewarded some of them with handsome estates or sizeable monetary awards. The generals trusted in Hitler's military genius and readily accepted his orders to treat the Eastern Front as a special theater of operations where normal laws of war did not apply. Blithely ignoring the consequences of plans to feed the vast invasion force off the land and gladly surrendering responsibility for pacification of areas in the rear to special units called "Einsatzgruppen" and "Sonderkommandos," they became accomplices in the murder of millions of Soviet citizens and Jews.

What makes the book a new and exceptional contribution to the field is that Hürter goes beyond proving that the elite of the Prussian general staff supported Hitler's goal to annihilate the Soviet army and population. Instead of collectively condemning the group as Nazi collaborators who later lied about the degree of their complicity, he shows how each commander almost voluntarily relinquished his control on the battlefield to Hitler. The author's painstaking analysis of correspondence, diaries, testimony in the Nuremberg military tri-

bunals, orders, and war diaries reveals the rationales for the generals' uncharacteristic actions. While some of the generals subscribed to the murderous goals of the Nazi ideology, others concentrated purely on the military aspects of the campaign, ignoring the suffering of civilians in their area of responsibility. Another small group—some of whom became conspirators in the plot to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944—finally grew so uncomfortable with the slaughter of innocent civilians and Jews that they belatedly and unsuccessfully tried to intervene on their behalf with their superiors at higher headquarters. The great strength of this book lies in the nuanced, differentiated assessments of the generals' personal responsibility for the Holocaust.

Hürter's *Hitlers Heerführer* should be required reading for scholars and students who want to understand how the Nazi regime won over the German general staff to condone and order unspeakable crimes on and off the battlefield. What is more, the book is a pleasure to read—even with footnotes that at times take up most of a page. I sincerely hope that the publisher of this book plans to translate it into English.

Note

[1]. The views expressed in this review are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect official positions or the views of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency or the Department of Defense.

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