



Karl-Heinz Frieser. *Die Ostfront 1943/44: Der Krieg im Osten und an den Nebenfronten.* München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2007. XVI, 1319 S. ISBN 978-3-421-06235-2.



Reviewed by Howard D. Grier (Department of History, Erskine College)

Published on H-German (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Defeat in the East

In June 2008 the MilitÄr-geschichtliches Forschungsamt completed its ten-volume history, *Germany and the Second World War*, which began appearing in 1979. Led by Karl-Heinz Frieser (author of *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West* [2005]), who describes most military operations on the eastern front, the team also included Bernd Wegner, who discusses the general strategic context and Scandinavia; Krisztian Ungvary, who treats Hungary; Klaus Schmider, who describes the course of the war in Yugoslavia; Klaus SchÄnherr, who explains developments in Romania and the southern Balkans; and Gerhard Schreiber, who discusses the end in North Africa and the campaigns in Sicily and Italy.

The volume of the series under review here is a superb work of scholarship. It consists of over twelve hundred pages of text, with more than five thousand footnotes, ten pages of archival sources, and sixty pages of bibliography. There are nearly a hundred informative maps, most in color, and dozens of charts and tables providing statistical information, orders of battle, and produc-

tion figures. The authors have mined existing scholarship and effectively utilized archives in Germany, Russia, Great Britain, the United States, Hungary, Romania, Italy, and Finland. In addition, the authors located German primary sources previously thought to have been lost, but which actually survived in Russian archives (for example, the war diary of the Second Army for several months of 1944). The notes contain numerous references to recent Russian publications that give the most accurate information currently available on Soviet troop strengths and casualties. The German edition costs less than fifty euros, a considerable bargain compared to Oxford University Press's English translations, the individual volumes of which sell for up to five hundred dollars.

This volume begins after the Battle of Stalingrad in spring 1943 and concludes at the end of 1944, just prior to the Soviet Vistula-Oder operation in January 1945. Although this work deals primarily with the eastern front, approximately two hundred pages address Scandinavia, Greece, Yugoslavia, North Africa, and Italy. The treatment, however, is not even. There are eighty pages on

Yugoslavia, but only sixty devoted to the German surrender in Tunisia and the campaigns in Sicily and Italy until May 1945. The volume focuses overwhelmingly on operational history, with little attention to occupation policy and war crimes.

One of the greatest strengths of this work is the evaluation of the impact of events on other fronts upon the war in the East. For example, the authors show how the campaign in North Africa, fears of an Allied landing on the European continent, and the actual invasions of Sicily, Italy, and Normandy affected the number of troops and amount of equipment available to Army High Command to conduct the war in the Soviet Union. Wegner maintains that even prior to the offensive at Kursk, Adolf Hitler regarded the defense of the continent in the West as of greater strategic importance than the eastern front.

The authors unequivocally state that, by 1943, Germany had lost the war. It simply could not contend with the Allies' superior manpower and productive capacity. Furthermore, Hitler's refusal to raise an army of Russian anti-communists and half-hearted efforts at total mobilization of human resources both on the home front and in occupied territories further tilted the balance in the Allies' favor. Frieser weighs in on the debate on whether German soldiers fought so long and hard because of ideological motivation or their efficient military establishment. He declares that without a doubt, it was the latter; German soldiers fought not for *Lebensraum* but for naked survival.

The contributions and sacrifices of Germany's allies receive greater attention in this volume than in most accounts. Germany's allies had little in common, most efforts to coordinate action failed, and Hitler's European allies had insufficient resources to contribute significantly to a global war. From November 1942 to February 1943, Hitler's Italian, Hungarian, and Romanian allies suffered over 300,000 casualties. Despite Hitler's stunning foreign policy successes before the war, once the conflict began he practically abandoned diplomacy altogether, probably because he intended to crush his enemies and dominate his allies. Attempts to blame his allies for the disasters at Stalingrad and Tunis did little to improve relations, as did German actions once their allies defected. Relations with Finland were strained for decades because the Germans destroyed thousands of homes during scorched-earth retreats in the North.

In his discussion of the Battle of Kursk, Frieser demolishes several enduring myths. He begins by emphasizing that the Kursk offensive was a limited attack with

no real strategic goal. Hitler wanted to seize the initiative and intended merely to remove a bulge in the front, thereby freeing German forces; thus, its main aim was defensive. Another persistent myth is the supposedly decisive tank battle at Prochorovka on July 12, 1943, where, according to Soviet historians, the Germans lost some 400 tanks in one of the war's most important clashes. In fact, the battle as reported never occurred. Only 186 German tanks participated in this engagement, in which the Germans lost 3 tanks compared with Russian losses of 235, making this incident hardly a decisive encounter. Despite Soviet claims that Germany lost over 3,500 tanks at Kursk, including 700 Tigers, Frieser maintains that actual German losses amounted to only 252 tanks and assault guns, of which only 10 were Tigers—compared to Soviet losses of over 1,600 tanks and assault guns. Furthermore, Hitler did not break off the attack at Kursk because of heavy losses, but in response to the Allied invasion of Sicily. Frieser concludes that Kursk's importance has been vastly exaggerated, but argues that it was important psychologically, because for the first time the Soviets halted a German summer offensive, and the Germans could not blame "General Winter" as they had done at Moscow and Stalingrad.

In the course of their account, the authors rescue several noteworthy engagements from obscurity, particularly a counterattack by Walther Model's Army Group Center at the beginning of August 1944, which halted the Soviet advance on Warsaw. Model's attack prevented the Soviets from taking Warsaw, and possibly from cutting off the withdrawal of Army Group Center by a thrust to the Baltic. Frieser likens Model's assault to Erich von Manstein's famous backhand blow in the spring of 1943 and even compares it to the 1914 Battle of Tannenberg. Frieser also devotes considerable attention to the destruction of Army Group Center in the summer of 1944, blaming Army Group commander Ernst Busch more than German intelligence for the failure to identify this sector as the Soviet *Schwerpunkt*. In the summer of 1944 the Germans expected an offensive, but only one; they did not anticipate that the Soviets would launch major offensives from Finland to the Balkans. Bagration represented the greatest military defeat to this point in German history, with nearly 300,000 killed and missing, and over 100,000 wounded (compared to 60,000 killed and 110,000 prisoners in the Stalingrad pocket).

In considering why Hitler refused to surrender or negotiate a peace, Frieser maintains that Hitler continued the war for a variety of reasons: he thought that if he repulsed the Anglo-American invasion of the continent he

could return his attention to the East with thirty to thirty-five divisions freed from the West; he hoped that new technologically superior weapons would turn the tide (jet aircraft, new models of U-boats, and unmanned rockets); and he was convinced that the enemy coalition would fall apart.

At this point Frieser introduces one of his most original arguments, involving his interpretation of Hitler's designation of a city or area as a *fester Platz*, or fortified place. This concept, first introduced in the spring of 1944, envisioned the garrison of the fortified place allowing itself to be surrounded and defending its post until it was relieved or annihilated, thereby denying vital areas to the Soviets and tying down Russian troops to besiege German forces there. Although most historians consider this idea to be yet another example of Hitler's foolhardy insistence on holding every foot of territory, Frieser argues that, in fact, fortified places also had an offensive purpose: to serve as bridgeheads for future offensives after the invasion in the West had been repulsed.

Frieser asserts that several of Hitler's most puzzling decisions resulted from his unwavering determination to regain the initiative. Time after time he ordered the defense of positions in actions that, in retrospect, appear as senseless clinging to lost outposts. Some of the most obvious examples are the hundreds of thousands of troops left to hold the Kuban, Crimea, and Courland. In each of these cases there were other motives as well (Admiral Karl Dönitz urged Hitler to defend the Crimea and Courland), but the hope of launching future offensives from these areas once the Third Reich had regained the initiative played an important role. Hitler realized that to win the war, he had to return to the attack. Why abandon areas German troops had fought so hard for if they only had to take them again? Frieser repeatedly compares Hitler to a person playing the game *vabanque*, and staking everything on a single card.

Although most analysis in the volume concerns operations of divisional and larger units, the authors include vignettes of small-unit actions to illustrate specific points. For example, to demonstrate the Tiger's superiority, the authors offer the example, near Kursk, of a single Tiger rushed from a repair shop to engage Soviet T-34s that had appeared behind the lines unexpectedly. The Tiger destroyed twenty-two Soviet tanks singlehandedly.

Ungvary explains Hitler's intense interest in Hungary in 1944-45, primarily for its oil, which he required for future offensive operations. Ungvary points out that in February 1945 almost half of the German Panzer divi-

sions on the eastern front (and a disproportionate number of Tiger and King Tiger tanks) were in Hungary. Furthermore, although many historians refer to the Ardennes Offensive (the Battle of the Bulge) as Germany's last major attack, Hitler launched five offensives in Hungary in spring 1945, and some of these involved more armored vehicles than the Ardennes. Ungvary describes the German defense of Budapest as one of the bloodiest sieges in history, in which total casualties amounted to well over 400,000. This 52-day siege frustrated the Soviet intention to take Vienna at the end of December 1944 and to reach southern Germany in March 1945. Ungvary also claims that Hungary's contribution to the Axis was greater than that of Italy, and he points out that with approximately 350,000 military and 590,000 civilian dead (of the civilians, at least 450,000 were Jews), Hungary suffered the war's fifth highest losses as a percentage of its population, behind only the Soviet Union, Poland, Germany, and Yugoslavia.

Wegner sees an increasing radicalization of Hitler's conduct of the war in the summer of 1944, exemplified by the crushing of the Polish Home Army's uprising in Warsaw and the Slovak uprising a few weeks later. His insistence on holding national capitals and cultural centers as fortresses or fortified sites virtually ensured that they would be reduced to rubble. Hitler continued the war even though German losses in the last year-and-a-half of the war were more than double those of the first four years. Wegner asserts that Hitler was not delusional, but possessed a much more modern, complex picture of war than most of his generals, and realized that the war was lost as early as 1942. Wegner provocatively asserts that the continuation of the war after this point served the purpose not of striving for final victory, but rather fed Hitler's hopes of choreographing his military defeat into a moral victory. This attitude arose from Hitler's reaction to defeat in 1918, and from the inexplicable connection he made at the latest in 1941 between military and genocidal war. Even though he might not win, continuing the war meant that he perhaps could succeed in exterminating the Jews, thereby fulfilling his historical mission. The genocide precluded any diplomatic ending of the war. Hitler's refusal to end the war and his desire for a heroic end prolonged the war and caused millions of unnecessary deaths.

With this volume the authors have provided an important corrective. Although during the Cold War, Western historians grossly underestimated the Soviet Union's vital role in the defeat of Nazi Germany, for the past twenty years scholars have emphasized the Soviet contri-

bution, and perhaps have gone too far. This work shifts the balance back somewhat by pointing out that the air and sea wars constituted a second front long before June 1944, and by demonstrating that concern for the invasion of the continent in the West, as well as the landings in Sicily and Italy, did draw off significant forces from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Allied deliveries of tanks, trucks, and jeeps significantly contributed to making the

Red Army more mobile than the Wehrmacht.

Overall, this is an impressive achievement. The authors have provided a meticulously researched and exhaustively documented in-depth examination of a critical period in the war. This important volume belongs in every university library and on the bookshelves of all World War II historians.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Howard D. Grier. Review of Frieser, Karl-Heinz, *Die Ostfront 1943/44: Der Krieg im Osten und an den Nebenfronten*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23082>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.