

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jörg Muth. *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequences for World War II.* Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011. 368 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-303-8.

Reviewed by Dale Herspring (Kansas State)

Published on H-War (May, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Permit me to begin my review of this outstanding book by noting that I am not a historian. I am a political scientist, although I eschew most of the quantitative analysis done in my discipline. I should also note that I have written/edited thirteen books and authored more than one hundred articles dealing with topics from Oliver Cromwell's use of chaplains, to my latest forthcoming work, *Military Culture and Civil-Military Relations: The American, Canadian, German and Russian Cases*, which compares civil-military relations in four different polities. In every case, in my efforts to find nomothetic relationships, I have relied heavily on the work done by historians. Without such work, I would probably only be on my second or third article and my first book.

I should also note that I have long believed that my field—and history for that matter—too often focuses almost exclusively on idiosyncratic analyses. While such work is valuable, and I have certainly relied on it in doing my research, I feel we would be further ahead if we focused more on comparative analysis. That is the main reason that I find Jörg Muth's work so useful and valuable. Methodologically, I would have approached the problem somewhat differently, but that should not detract from Muth's study. In fact, that is part of its value. The last time I checked, none of us has a monopoly on wisdom and/or knowledge.

From an analytical standpoint, Muth approaches this problem from what I would call an institutional standpoint. He makes no effort to come up with a special comparative methodology, but compares American and German educational institutions and their approaches to

training and educating officers during the interwar years. He then goes on to discuss the value of the two educational systems in developing combat leaders in World War II.

While I cannot claim to be an expert on West Point (I have lectured several times at Annapolis and I have a son who graduated from the United States Naval Academy), I found his analysis of it valuable, and as far as I can tell on the mark for the period covered. My only reservation, having watched a son go through the academy process, is that there is a logic behind things like memorizing nonsense and finding oneself braced against the wall. In the first instance, it helps with memorization, a skill that can save lives, while in the second, someone who cannot withstand such pressure should not be commanding troops. Hazing, especially when it gets physical, however, is another matter.

Muth's discussion of the German counterpart is worth reading. It is clear that the prestige and educational standards of the day were much higher than in the United States. The German variant also involved much greater interaction with senior officers than was the case at West Point, and hazing was less of a problem. Indeed, one of Muth's findings that surprised me was the closer relationship between officers and the enlisted in the German versus American military (with the exception of U.S. airborne units). This relationship translated into higher casualty rates among German officers in World War II. It should come as no surprise that Muth argues that the *Kadettenschulen* were anything but role models for an educational system, but they were much more suited for the

education of future officers than the United States Military Academyâ (p. 109).

Muth is also highly critical of the United States Command and General Staff School (CGSS) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He criticizes it for its low intellectual content, and maintains that officers were often sent to it to get rid of them or the superiors were merely too old-fashioned to understand the value of an advanced military schoolâ (p. 124). When students arrived at the CGSS, they discovered much to their dismay, that their instructors often knew less about the subject under consideration than they did. Citing a number of sources, Muth notes that former students frequently described their instructors âas having a dull manner of instructionâ and lessons as being filled with mind-numbing detailâ and stereotyped teaching.ââ (p. 126). He also cites George Pattonâs and George C. Marshallâs negative comments on the school. The Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, gets a higher rating, primarily, it appears, because of the influence of a German exchange officer.

In discussing the German equivalent educational institutions, Muth points out that American visitors to the reestablished *Kriegsakademie* found the atmosphere pleasantly relaxedâ in contrast to classes at the CGSS (p. 150). Exams were also more realistic in dealing with the kind of real-world problems likely to face an officer, in part because instructors were war veterans with extensive experienceâ (p. 161). Instructors included such officers as Erwin Rommel in tactics and Heinz Guderian in motor transportation procedures.â It is worth noting that in contrast to the American schools, Muth maintains, there was no school solution.â Muth also argues that while it is rare to find praise for the instructors at CGSS, the praise for the teachers at the German institutions is

nearly universal and comes from visiting officers of several nations as well as from the Germansâ (p. 162). One of the most surprising claims by Muth—in my opinion—is that the German officer corps was more open to dissent and its policy of *Auftragstaktik* led to more command flexibility than the American system.

So why did the German military lose the war? Muth lists a number of reasons. First, Adolf Hitler bought off some of the senior generals. Second, Colonel General Franz Hadler, the chief of staff of the army, took away the commandersâ ability to act and think on their own. Finally, Muth blames the arrogance of the officer corps that led senior officers to underestimate its enemies. All those immense flaws of the *Wehrmacht* senior officers counterbalanced the excellence in command, tactics, and leadership German officers displayed in World War IIâ (p. 203).

Some readers will find this extremely well written and accessible book upsetting. The author notes in his afterword that some readers may think that he took his position on the superiority of the German educational system because he is German. He strongly claims that this is not the case. I leave it to the reader to decide for him or herself. The one strong feeling I came away with after reading this book is that comparative analysis is even more important in an area like military studies. In this sense, Muth is to be commended for taking the time to open a discussion—and that is certainly what I hope the reaction to his work will be. For my own personal interest, I would like to see a historian look at the educational systems of the United States and the German imperial navies. Assuming Muth is right—and that is a big assumption—one cannot help but wonder what educational practices were prevalent in the nautical world.

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

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

Citation: Dale Herspring. Review of Muth, Jörg, *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequences for World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34233>



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