

Kenneth Macksey. *Guderian: Panzer General*. London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2003. xii + 228 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-538-6.



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If Germany had defeated the U.S.S.R. militarily in 1941-42, it is likely that the tightly knit Guderian clan would still today occupy the estate at Deipenhof in the Warthegau in West Prussia (now part of Poland) that was given to Generaloberst Heinz Guderian in October 1942 by Adolf Hitler. What should we make of this gift from the *Fuehrer* to Guderian, the acknowledged genius behind German armored forces in World War II? Was it simply one among many such secretive gifts that Hitler lavished upon the paladins and favorites of the Reich on the occasions of their anniversaries and birthdays, or when they recorded an especially notable achievement? (Guderian had been awarded the rare Oak Leaves to the Iron Cross in July 1941.) Alternatively, was it a subtle bribe to muffle an occasionally insubordinate general who, despite demonstrated affinity for National Socialism and Adolf Hitler, might have been viewed by Hitler as potentially disruptive and contentious? He was, after all, "always a rebel in his profession," according to Downing, and known for speaking his mind to nearly everyone, even to his *Fuehrer*.^[1] Does the gift further suggest that Hitler regarded Guderian, who had been sacked for ordering a retreat south of Moscow contrary to the *Fuehrer's* orders in December 1941, as, nonetheless, an ideological comrade?

These are among the interpretative dilemmas Ken-

neth Macksey, veteran military historian, tackles in his revision of his original 1975 biography of Heinz Guderian. Guderian is justly celebrated as a military leader of "brilliant gifts," who was bold, inventive, charismatic and supremely determined.^[2] His inspired, "lead from the front" generalship hastened the fall of Poland in September 1939, keyed the spectacular German armored dash across France to the English Channel in May 1940, led Panzer Group Two to unprecedented victories in the U.S.S.R. in Fall 1941, and delayed the collapse of Germany in the face of the Soviet onslaught, 1943-45. He was, during these years, one of the most effective generals in the world and certainly the apotheosis of leadership in armored, mobile warfare. More so than any other general, his leadership satisfied Saint-Exupery's memorable criterion. "An armoured division should move against the enemy like water. It should bear lightly against the enemy's wall of defense and advance only at the point where it meets no resistance."^[3] Yet, as Earl Ziemke, a well-regarded historian of the battles on the Eastern Front has concluded, on occasion Guderian's "judgment was less than impeccable."^[4] He sometimes tended toward recklessness, could be insulting in approach, and played footsy with the Nazi inner circle. General Walter Warlimont of the General Staff noted after the war that Guderian "politically sought a closer association with the Party than was customary among the officers" (p. 176)

and shrank from becoming involved in any resistance activities against Hitler. The salient question, then, is how well does Macksey handle the ambiguity of such situations in his revised edition?

Macksey's original biography of Guderian was solid, conventional work that relied primarily upon Guderian's own writings, but also utilized the post-war evaluations of Guderian by many individuals, including Sir Basil Liddell Hart. Macksey, a onetime British tank officer who saw action in Western Europe in 1944-45, is at his best when he details Guderian's astonishing, driving development and use of Germany's Panzer forces. He also dispenses at least passing coverage to nearly all the major events and issues of Guderian's life. However, unless an author simply wants to sell a few additional books, the production of a revised edition of a well-accepted biography should presume the author has acquired new material that either buttresses previously weak assertions or changes some conclusions. Macksey says three developments caused him to revise the biography. First, new information mined from Ultra intelligence intercepts is now available and has changed how we view leadership decisions in the war. Second, Macksey feels the need to assess the impact of what he labels the Liddell Hart "saga" (p. xi). Macksey alleges Liddell Hart brought ruin to his own scholarly reputation by overzealous self-promotion of the notion that he had a tremendous impact upon Guderian's thinking about armored warfare. Third, Macksey has been able to talk with surviving members of Guderian's family and associates of General Erich Fellgiebel, who was in charge of the Wehrmacht's communications at the time of the Hitler assassination attempt on 20 July 1944.[5] The family had information that clarified Guderian's previously cloudy role on that day. Thus, Macksey concluded another edition was merited. Macksey's revised biography of Guderian continues to be solid work because it adds context and critical analysis to Guderian's own autobiography, *Panzer Leader*, which appeared in English in 1952.[6] Although Macksey, on the whole, is rather gentle in his treatment of Guderian, this biography is not hagiographic to the same degree as his study of Albert Kesselring.[7] Nevertheless, several unresolved issues and caveats are worthy of mention.

First, there is the matter of the gift from Hitler to Guderian. Macksey opts not to delve into the possible elements of corruption and avarice that surrounded the huge gift of money that Guderian received from Hitler in 1942 to enable him to purchase the Deipenhof estate.[8] Not all of the military elite received such gifts; Rommel, for example, neither received nor accepted anything,

despite his status as one of the *Prominenten*. With gift commitment in hand, Guderian toured the Warthegau area with the Gauleiter's staff and found the estate he wanted, at which time the Polish owners were evicted. Probably out of embarrassment, Guderian says very little about the gift in *Panzer Leader*. Nor does Guderian mention that originally he had selected a much larger estate, but this request was denied as excessive and a bad precedent, given that individuals more prominent than Guderian also were to receive estates. Similarly, Guderian does not mention specifically that in September 1939 his family had repossessed the family's ancestral estate at Gross-Klonia in the Warthegau. Nor does he disclose that he successfully petitioned to avoid paying the usual German tax on the Deipenhof gift, or that he was one of more than one hundred notables in the Reich receiving sizeable *Sonderzahlungen* (special payments) each month from the *Fuehrer*. In Guderian's case, he received 2,000 *Reichsmark* per month in addition to his regular salary. Macksey skates over or chooses not to write about nearly all of these uncomfortable details even though Gerd Uebershaer and Winfried Vogel's valuable study of Hitler's largely confidential gifts (including Guderian's) was published in 1999.

Second, Macksey tends to underplay Guderian's impulsive, sometimes reckless nature, which on several occasions almost resulted in his being captured by the enemy. John Erickson, for example, notes that Guderian narrowly avoided capture by the Soviets on the third day of Barbarossa.[9] Guderian was wont to make quick, instinctive decisions on limited data. To his credit, he usually was correct, and Macksey underscores these instances. However, these lightning choices sometimes blew up in his face and when they did, Guderian could not resist attempts to place the blame on others. On occasion, he would gild the factual lily in order to convince his superiors of the necessity of his precipitate course of action. Multiple superior officers repetitively heard from Guderian that it was already too late to reverse an action that Guderian had taken. This occasional recklessness extended to the political realm, where Guderian carelessly became enmeshed in *Freikorps* machinations in Latvia in 1919, nearly ending his promising career. Macksey notes that this activity put him "under a distinct cloud" (p. 33), but does not connect this cloud to a more general pattern of behavior. Indeed, he argues the opposite, that this episode drove Guderian away from politics. This is a judgment difficult to support. Guderian continued to dabble in politics, but became more astute in how he did so.

Third, Macksey does not give sufficient weight to Guderian's long-term sympathies for Adolf Hitler as a person and the National Socialists as a movement. Guderian's endorsement of the cause of the *Freikorps* in 1919 was followed by his occasional attendance at Nazi Party meetings after Hitler took power; numerous personal meetings and dinners with Hitler; and, his insertion of flattering prose about Hitler in his *Achtung! Panzer* in 1937.[10] He ignored or repressed the reality of the *Kristallnacht*, the development of the concentration camp system and the Holocaust, as well as the sordid behavior of some elements of the *Wehrmacht* in the East, beginning in Poland. He showed little interest in protecting Polish and Soviet prisoners of war and citizens, or protesting their treatment; and was inattentive to the depredations of the *Einsatzgruppen* on the Eastern Front. Guderian consistently refused to do more than listen to the anti-Hitler resistance, which fit with his servile radio broadcast and issuance of written orders after becoming Chief of Staff of the OKH in July 1944, in which he demanded a National Socialist officer corps and told General Staff officers they should "exhibit the thoughts of the *Fuehrer*" (p. 190); his "half hearted" encouragement of attempts to begin peace negotiations; and, his early 1950s leadership of a group of former German military leaders and Nazis who sought to rearm and reunify Germany.[11] Taken together, these actions paint a less flattering picture. However, Macksey views this portrait rather benignly, or ignores its flaws, despite many new developments such as the *Historikerstreit*, and works such as Heer and Naumann's seminal exploration of *Wehrmacht* atrocities on the Eastern Front, published as early as 1995. Macksey does touch at least indirectly on most of these topics. Nevertheless, he seems reluctant to follow their trail inductively to reach a general summary conclusion. The judgment of others has been more piercing. R. T. Paget's searing comment about the German officer corps that, "like the Pharisees, they passed upon the other side of the road," applies, with certainty, to Guderian's behavior.[12] Yet, except when he observes that *Schneller Heinz* had "fissures" in his character (p. 217), Macksey finds circumstantial reasons to grant Guderian a moral pass. One can agree with Macksey that many others, including some Allied leaders, failed similar character tests, without absolving Guderian.

Fourth, Macksey does not exhibit any skepticism over Guderian's assertion that he advocated a Mediterranean Strategy after the fall of France (p. 136). A viable strategic option for Germany in the summer of 1940 was to move south and drive Britain out of the Mediterranean

region (and perhaps away from the Middle East oilfields as well) by capturing Gibraltar, Malta, most of the North African coastline and Suez. Arguably, such a strategy might have driven Britain from the war or resulted in the fall of the Churchill government, in which case a government conducive to peace negotiations might have resulted. In summer 1940, it seems unlikely that the United States would have intervened in such a struggle. Further, this strategy would have deferred a conflict with the Soviet Union and enabled Germany to fight a one front war, if this likely battle of autocracies were to occur. Regardless, it was, at the very least, a course of action that would have changed the war dramatically. Even so, when Guderian mentions his advocacy of this approach, Macksey does not pursue the notion. Perhaps he agrees implicitly with Downing, who noted, "whether Guderian really did see things so clearly in 1940 is, of course, open to doubt." [13]

Fifth, Macksey does not really ask whether the renewed German drive on Moscow in October 1941 was wise, or if it actually would have ended the war, if successful. Instead, he stresses Guderian's insistence that Moscow be the primary strategic objective and the Generaloberst's disappointment that his armored group was diverted south to the massive encirclement battle around Kiev in August and September 1941. However, there is room to question Guderian's narrative here.[14] Guderian's receipt of the coveted Oak Leaves to the Iron Cross on July 17, 1941 and the subsequent placement of more divisions under his command may have assuaged his objections to Hitler's plan. This was the view of Halder and others, who believed Guderian sold out. In any case, once the Kiev encirclement was completed (and it may have netted an astonishing 660,000 Soviet prisoners), the question devolved to one of whether or not it was still productive for Germany to resume its drive on Moscow. Militating against such a move was the rapidly approaching Russian winter, and the need to refit and replace worn and destroyed tanks and equipment. By September 15, 1941, more than one half of the tanks available to Army Group Center in June 1941 were either destroyed or out of commission. Only 25 percent of the tanks in Guderian's renamed Second Panzer Army were available for battle after Kiev. Shortages of materiel were rampant. Exacerbating factors included the inability of the *Wehrmacht* to replace the almost 500,000 casualties it had suffered thus far and the reality that Guderian was twice as far from Moscow as he had been at the end of July 1941. Finally, the respite before Moscow had provided the Soviet Army with the opportunity to prepare its Moscow defenses and

to begin moving more than twenty-five quality divisions from the Far East. The Germans still enjoyed an approximate eight to five manpower advantage in terms of front line troops in the area of Army Group Center, but time was of the essence.[15] The better part of valor might have been to defer the Moscow drive until spring 1942 and instead occupy the remainder of Ukraine and seize the oil-rich Caucasus.

Nonetheless, Guderian continued to be a strong advocate of renewing the Moscow thrust, which resulted in what has been termed the “sharpest setback the German Army had suffered since 1918 and a defeat of such magnitude that it crippled Germany’s chances for victory over the Soviet Union.”[16] It does appear that Guderian was persuasive in convincing Hitler to undertake this risky venture, which hardly would have constituted such a gamble forty-five days earlier.[17] Indeed, already on August 4, 1941, Guderian had met with the *Fuehrer* and told him he believed the Soviet Army was scraping the bottom of its manpower barrel, a judgment far off the mark. Macksey, however, does not choose to investigate Guderian’s culpability for this critical decision and notes only that the renewed drive on Moscow had “theoretical feasibility” (p. 153), though it constituted a very difficult assignment. Fugate, however, lambastes Guderian, asserting that he was an “influence monger,” who “uncorked this bottle of heady wine and served it to his superiors,” but then pointed the finger of blame at others when the operation predictably failed.[18] Robert Kershaw is on target when he describes the final assault on Moscow as “more a gamble than a considered operational plan.”[19].

Sixth, Macksey uses the revised edition as a means to land body blows to the scholarly reputation of Sir Basil Liddell Hart. He strongly endorses John Mearsheimer’s highly critical evaluation of the importance of Liddell Hart’s contribution to armored, mobile war-making and highlights Mearsheimer’s finding that Liddell Hart supplied Guderian with a passage to insert in the English language version of *Panzer Leader*; the passage flatters Liddell Hart and proclaims Guderian’s intellectual debt to him.[20] Doubtless, the self-promoting Liddell Hart was overly insistent that he be described as a seminal military thinker. Further, in later years, he obfuscated or ignored many of his 1930s predictions that were rendered foolish by events. Yet, at the end of the day, it also is true that Liddell Hart influenced Guderian substantially and on many other occasions Guderian acknowledged this. For example, in March 1943, when Guderian assumed the role of Inspector General of Armored Troops, he met with

a large group of senior officers and read to them from an article authored by Liddell Hart. Azar Gat provides a useful counterpoint to the tendency of Macksey and others to degrade Liddell Hart.[21] True, Liddell Hart’s assertions of his influence on Guderian and the course of World War II in general are substantially overdone. Even so, the great body of Liddell Hart’s work remains perceptive and valuable.

Macksey leaves us, then, with a somewhat sanitized version of Heinz Guderian. Are the omissions and distortions in this version fatal? Hardly. This is not a wine that has become sour. Nevertheless, these oversights constitute items that should be addressed when and if Macksey entertains yet another edition of this useful book. Interestingly, the *Bundeswehr* was forced to confront many of the same ambiguities in Guderian’s military career when it considered naming an army barracks after him in the mid-1960s. Subsequent media attention and public discussion focused considerable attention on unresolved and embarrassing aspects of Guderian’s career, and the *Bundeswehr* ultimately abandoned the naming notion despite his amazing military achievements. The episode did underline, however, the extent to which Generaloberst Heinz Guderian was a complex, nuanced individual who is not so easily described.

Notes:

- [1]. David Downing, *The Devil’s Virtuosos: German Generals at War, 1940-1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977), p. 17.
- [2]. F. W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, trans. H. Betzler, ed. L. C. F. Turner (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), p. 258.
- [3]. Antoine de Saint Exupery, *Flight to Arras*, trans. Lewis Galantieri (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1942), pp. 64-65.
- [4]. Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1968), p. 446.
- [5]. Much new information Macksey regarded as definitive was generated by Karl Heinz von Wildhagen, *Erich Fellgiebel* (Wennigsen/Hanover: Selbstverlegen, 1970).
- [6]. Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Dutton, 1952).
- [7]. Kenneth Macksey, *Kesselring: German Master Strategist of the Second World War* (London: Greenhill

Press, 1996).

[8]. Gerd R. Ueberschaer and Winfried Vogel, *Dienen und Verdienen: Hitler's Geschenke und Seine Eliten* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1999). Note that Guderian's Deipenhof was 2,500 *Morgen* in size. Since a *Morgen* usually was less than one American acre, it seems likely that Deipenhof was less than 2,500 acres, however, the variable definition of a *Morgen* makes it difficult to know.

[9]. John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

[10]. Heinz Guderian, *Achtung! Panzer: The Development of Armoured Forces, Their Tactics and Operational Potential*, trans. Christopher Duffy (London: Arms and Armour, 1995).

[11]. John Wheeler Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945* (New York and London: Penguin, 1967), p. 203.

[12]. R. T. Paget, *Manstein: His Campaigns and His Trial* (London: Collins, 1957), p. 2.

[13]. Downing, p. 54. The "doability" of the Mediterranean option is subject to question in light of the attitudes displayed by Franco and Mussolini.

[14]. Bryan I. Fugate, *Operation Barbarossa: Strategy and Tactics on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1984).

[15]. These and other valuable data may be found in Freiburg Militaergeschichtlichen Forschungsamtes. *Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Verlag, 1983, 1991), pp. 657-58.

[16]. Fugate, pp. 277-78.

[17]. R. H. S. Stolfi, *Hitler's Panzers East: World War II Reinterpreted* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). Stolfi asserts that the probability of Germany defeating the Soviet Union already in fall 1941 was well above 90 percent if it had continued toward Moscow and not been sidetracked south. There are, of course, other views on this.

[18]. Fugate, pp. 311, 289.

[19]. Robert J. Kershaw, *War without Garlands: Operation Barbarossa, 1941/42* (New York: Sarpedon, 2000). Kershaw points out OKW's "inability to recognize the extent to which German fighting power has actually eroded by September" (p. 241).

[20]. John J. Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); and Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, p. 20.

[21]. Azar Gat, *British Armour Theory and the Rise of the Panzer Arm: Revising the Revisionists* (New York and Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000).

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