

Military Strategy in War and Peace: Introduction

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In July of 2010 a small group of historians from the University of Calgary, the United States, and the German Armed Forces gathered for a workshop at the University of Calgary. For a day and a half the participants struggled with the question “what is the impact of strategy on battlefield outcomes?” in a wide variety of historical circumstances from ancient Greece to the 21st Century. These deliberations follow below.

The tone for this workshop was set by Dr. Bernd Wegener of Helmut Schmidt University in a paper delivered at the University of Calgary in September 2009 on the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. In that paper Dr. Wegener laid out a number of significant strategic factors connected to the Third Reich’s “cult of personality” that led directly to the Nazi defeat. The paper, in effect, made a case that no matter how competent the German armed forces had been in World War II, the greatest friction they had to overcome was the Nazi political system.

A similar case has been made by Adam Tooze in his 2006 book *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, Allen Lane, 2006) though Tooze’s work focuses on the fiscal, economic and monetary policy of the Third Reich rather than its political system. Neither scholar claims that the outcome of the war was pre-determined by Allied – particularly American – industrial power. Both make a solid case that when scholars examine the successes or failures of particular Allied

operations, a main focus of research must be the larger context within which battles were fought.

One example of the failure of many analysts to take these larger issues into account is the long-standing debate about the alleged “failure” of the Allies to close the Falaise Gap more quickly in August 1944 so as to completely destroy the German armoured divisions trapped in the Falaise Pocket. The argument often made is that although the Germans lost almost all of their equipment in the gap and tens of thousands of officers and men, a hard core of Panzergruppe West survived and escaped and formed the nucleus of the resurrection of Hitler’s armies in the late fall and early winter of 1944. Thus the Allied victory in Normandy was only “partial” and by implication, someone didn’t do a proper job (often blamed on the performance of First Canadian Army).

When larger strategic considerations are taken into account, however, both Tooze’s work and Wegener’s could form the basis of a claim that the iron grip of the Nazi regime combined with Hitler’s determination to either win the war or bring Germany into the pit of national destruction were the two single greatest factors behind the so-called “miracle in the west” which really was no miracle at all when closely examined.

Tooze points out that the rush to replace the armour lost in Normandy was carried out only by effectively looting the rest of Germany’s by then hard-pressed war production industry and whatever was left of its consumer goods sector to build tanks, i.e., at the cost of virtually everything from tooth brushes to jet fighters. And it was done in large measure by slave and concentration camp labour and by foreign labour working for starvation-level wages. What was it then that gave Germany a second breath on the western front in late 1944? The failure to close the Falaise Gap more quickly or the extreme depravity of the Nazi regime, or both? Surely the second factor must weigh at least equally with the first.

At bottom the proposition explored in the Calgary workshop is that many issues weigh in deciding victory and defeat, from small section/squad level actions to the clash of army groups, but that high strategy or grand strategy is by far the most important factor in the eventual outcome of a war. Generations of military historians have told us

so, yet it seems that increased attention is being paid these days by military historians to battle, even down to small unit action. Some military historians even appear to believe that battle alone is the true focus of military history.

The participants at the Calgary Workshop would disagree. Military history is a vast field ranging from weapons and small unit tactics to logistics and supply to staff education and yes, of course, to battles of all shapes and sizes. And the more that is studied and written about war in general, either “cold” or “hot”, the more we will understand about this phenomenon. All that the participants of the Calgary Workshop would claim is that strategy and grand strategy form the context within which all war and diplomacy is conducted and deserves at least as much attention as any other factor in the study of military history.