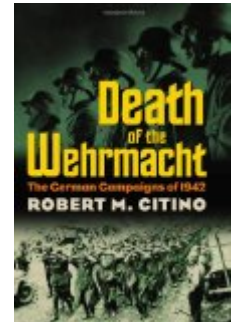


Robert M. Citino. *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xiv + 429 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1531-5.



Reviewed by Stephen G. Fritz

Published on H-German (March, 2008)

Continuing his examination of the German way of war, Robert Citino has produced a cogently argued, clearly written book in which he asserts that the German defeat in World War II was as much conceptual as it was material. Given its geographical position and limited resource base, according to Citino, first Prussian, then German leaders learned that in order to survive a world of hostile enemies, wars had to be short, sharp, and decisive. Consequently, German military doctrine placed great emphasis on operational factors, to the detriment of prosaic material and logistical considerations. German planners thus concentrated their efforts on designing elegant operational schemes to achieve victory, while their opposite numbers in the enemy states tediously mobilized economic resources. As a result, Germany found itself dangerously dependent on maneuver for success, since it consistently lacked the firepower and material resources necessary for decisive victory. When it worked, as in 1870-71, the triumph was glittering and spectacular; when it failed, as in 1941-42, the defeat was total and ruinous. It seemed for Germany that war was always all or

nothing; its dependence on operational doctrine left it little room for any alternative outcome.

After a short introduction in which he deftly summarizes Prussian/German military doctrine, Citino makes it clear that, based on its history, the operational situation facing German leaders after 1941 was neither unique nor particularly worrisome. The fact that Germany found itself surrounded by enemies that substantially outnumbered it and had access to vastly greater economic resources was nothing new in German military history. Indeed, graduates of the *Kriegsakademie* knew what to do, since precisely this scenario formed the basis of their operational studies. The lesson of German history screamed one thing: attack and land a crushing blow against a single opponent to shatter the enemy coalition. Citino asserts that the weakness of this approach had already manifested itself by the end of 1941. Given their emphasis on operational concerns, German military planners were in a sort of conceptual prison, one in which they thought very little about strategic concerns, but focused almost exclusively on operational victories. The weakness of this ap-

proach lay in the lack of any exit strategy. If maneuver and a war of movement failed to yield a quick strategic victory, the only option left to German leaders seemed to be more of the same: keep winning operational triumphs in the hope that they would eventually lead to overall success. Therefore, as Citino notes wryly, by 1941, "the Wehrmacht ... had conquered itself into a strategic impasse" (pp. 33-34).

Just as significantly, these dazzling successes of 1939-41, whether in Poland, Scandinavia, France, or the Balkans, while not achieving any decisive results, had left the Wehrmacht dangerously overextended. Much to German dismay, the pattern established in the first two years of the war held fast in the second half of 1941. Once again, the Germans won brilliant battles of maneuver and encirclement but to no avail; the Soviets stubbornly refused to give up. More ominously, although they lent themselves to spectacular headlines and brilliant weekly newsreels, these encirclement battles proved to be grinding, grueling, costly affairs that began the process of gutting the Wehrmacht. As Citino points out, "[t]he Wehrmacht's losses in men and material, even in victory, were far heavier than they had been in previous campaigns" (p. 42). Indeed, one might note that the German army actually suffered more combat deaths in July 1941 than in the crisis months of December 1941 or January-February 1942. For a military organization not keen on logistics or economic mobilization under the best of circumstances, these losses proved beyond capacity for replacement. From the summer of 1941, the German army consistently ran short on crucial supplies necessary to sustain an all-out war effort.

Although the grim, dogged Soviet resistance was primarily responsible for preventing the Germans from converting operational triumphs into decisive victory, another problem had emerged that would plague the Germans in 1942: a lack of clear focus on the major strategic goals of the Barbarossa campaign. For a country that lacked suffi-

cient resources in the first place, the failure to prioritize key aims on the Eastern Front risked a serious dispersal of effort that could only undermine the larger goal of a quick victory. In a further bitter twist, the conflict between Adolf Hitler and his military leaders put another cherished German military tradition into question: the independence of army commanders in the field. Although the Germans survived the Soviet counter-attack before Moscow and the savage winter of 1941-42, the experience both reinforced and undermined key German ideas on how to make war.

As German leaders pondered the military situation in the early spring of 1942, Citino raises one of the most puzzling questions of World War II: given the fact that their armies occupied much of Europe, why did the Germans fail to mobilize resources on a scale similar to their enemies? Unfortunately, although he poses the question, Citino doesn't provide any answers. This omission does not so much point to a failure on his part as illustrate a limitation inherent in operational military history: the focus must remain on the battlefield. And here, Citino once again proves adept in his analysis of operational factors. Although the German gaze remained squarely on the Soviet Union, at this point Citino shifts the strategic focus of his book to the desert war in North Africa. Admittedly a side show in terms of sheer numbers, the North African campaign nonetheless confronted the Germans with the troubling reminder that although they barely had strength enough to fight in one theater at a time, they now faced the reality of having to conduct operations simultaneously in a number of far-flung areas. This dispersal of energies, in turn, presented problems of both a command and logistical nature. In North Africa, of course, Erwin Rommel invoked the traditional independence of the field commander to violate orders on a consistent basis. Even as he was embarrassing his opponents with his operational and tactical brilliance, however, he lacked sufficient logistical support to achieve anything like a decisive strategic victory. In a reprise of the Russian

campaign of 1941, every German victory in North Africa simply led to a strategic impasse that the Germans could not resolve.

In similar fashion, when faced with the dilemma of what to do in Russia after the blitzkrieg had failed, German planners came to the only conclusion possible given their history, training, and assumptions: launch another blitzkrieg campaign. In arriving at this decision, army leaders reinforced their tradition. As Citino also notes, though, in terms of the operational plan for 1942 they departed significantly from tradition and past practices: it was to be an exceedingly complex operation based on a series of sequential actions directed from the top with little decision-making freedom accorded field commanders. Success was assured only if the enemy cooperated once again in his destruction. The plan, Operation Blue, began to fall apart almost immediately, a consequence of both German and Soviet actions. Here, the experience of 1941 proved significant. Determined to avoid the operational chaos of the latter stages of the 1941 campaign and faced with insufficient economic and military resources (shortages in the Luftwaffe proved especially limiting), German planners now aimed not to pull off deep battles of encirclement, but instead to rely on Soviet forces staying in place and conduct a rolling series of shallow encirclements. In the event, whether from sheer panic or because of a Soviet decision to withdraw into the vast expanse of southern Russia, the initial German thrusts in the summer of 1942, while conquering much territory, netted few prisoners. The Wehrmacht found itself punching air. Rather than striking in depth to the east and trapping large Soviet formations against the natural line of the Volga, the Germans found themselves sliding ineffectually to the south in an operation that stretched their supply lines to the breaking point. Almost from the beginning, the Soviet retreat threatened to render the operational plan for 1942 pointless.

This operational problem concealed a larger dilemma. Hitler's goal for the war against the Soviet Union had always been the annexation of *Lebensraum*, but how was it to be achieved? The Germans barely had the resources to conquer European Russia, let alone the entire Soviet Union. Now that the Red Army had learned not to let itself be trapped in encirclement battles, destruction of the enemy forces proved beyond German capabilities. As the situation in North Africa demonstrated, the USSR's western allies were steadily amassing economic and military resources for use against Germany. For their part, the Germans found themselves increasingly dependent on their allies, Italy, Rumania, and Hungary, nations that could marshal far few resources than those of the western allies. Hitler further compounded this increasingly unfavorable situation with his impatience and impetuosity: splitting the already over-stretched German forces, demanding that they conduct operations simultaneously that had been planned sequentially, and ignoring the threatening situation on the exposed German flanks. Once again, the Germans confronted their basic dilemma, how to do more with less. As Citino stresses repeatedly, the Germans had enough strength to win on the operational level, but failed to translate these gains this into strategic victory. This quandary simply grew with increasing German success on the battlefield, as scarce resources had to be dispensed over a wider area. To Citino, this conundrum reflects the basic German way of war itself, a conceptual framework based on historical experience that, limited in its focus to operational details, by definition could not devise an alternative approach if operational success failed to bring a swift strategic victory.

Viewed from the present perspective, in light of our awareness of the chronic German deficiencies of men and material, the outcome seems almost inevitable: the turning points at Stalingrad and El Alamein, then the grinding down of German resistance over the next three years. Citino

resists that temptation, instead soberly reminding us that "the most shocking aspect of 1942 ... is how absurdly close the Wehrmacht came to taking not one but all of its objectives for 1942" (p. 306). Citino is correct in this judgment, and he both affirms and raises some questions about his thesis. As Richard Overly has demonstrated, the outcome of World War II hinged on the cumulative effect of narrow victories in a few key areas that eventually produced an overwhelming allied triumph. One of these key areas was economic mobilization, where the Germans failed to convert the resources of occupied Europe into sufficient military strength. Did this failure occur because, as Citino would argue, the German leadership simply did not concern itself with non-military factors, being focused exclusively on operational matters and thus blind to the obvious flaws in their method? Or, as others might argue, was it the result of the chronic institutional Darwinism and inefficiency of the Nazi bureaucracy, the racist and exploitative nature of the German occupation, the burdens produced by trying simultaneously to fight a military war and a war against the Jews, or simply the ultimately limitless aims of Hitler?

As with all good interpretative histories, Citino forces the reader to think about his assertions. Was the German failure in Russia in 1941 the result of an exclusive emphasis on operational thinking, or a consequence of a poor operational plan, one with no clearly defined focus upon which the Germans could concentrate resources? How great a role did key operational decisions play in the German defeats of 1941 and 1942? Did the Germans over-extend themselves before Moscow in 1941 because of blind operational thinking or because of recent historical memories (the Marne in September 1914) of a strategic victory thrown away because of a failure of effort at the last minute? As Citino notes of German actions in Russia in 1942, "the operational plans for the summer offensive were in many ways a departure from past military practice" (p. 157). Indeed, in

terms of preparation and assembly of forces, Operation Blue marked, according to Citino, "a remarkable break with the past" (p. 158). Does this information suggest, then, that the Germans might have been successful if they had maintained their operational traditions? Or, was the departure from customary practice itself the result of the failure of operational thinking? German commanders' loss of decision-making autonomy in the field also constituted a key sub-theme of 1942, and again represented a significant departure from German war-making custom. With less interference from above and more freedom on the ground, could the defeat of 1942 been turned into an operational victory?

Robert Citino has produced an outstanding work of operational military history, a book that combines exhaustive research with a clear, well-argued thesis. Indeed, many of the endnotes read like mini-historiographical essays; here Citino discusses interpretative controversies surrounding many key assertions in the book. His assessment of the 1942 German campaign in the Soviet Union is especially noteworthy, not simply in its discussion of the operational details, but the manner in which he demonstrates that a unique way of fighting, the German way of war, died in the steppes of southern Russia. With better decision-making and operational plans, could the Germans have fared better in Russia in 1942? The answer is almost certainly yes. Would such victories have changed the outcome of the war? Given the enormous economic potential of the United States and its development of the atomic bomb, the answer is almost certainly no.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Stephen G. Fritz. Review of Citino, Robert M. *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. March, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14333>



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