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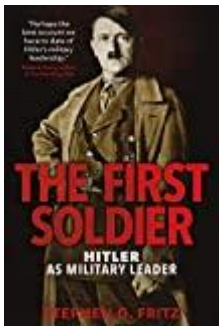
Stephen G. Fritz. *The First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. Illustrations, maps. 480 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-20598-5.



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In *First Soldier: Hitler as Military Leader*, Stephen G. Fritz has produced a mixed bag. Since the book has no proper introduction, where Fritz would have explained his reasons for writing it or his thesis, we have to make assumptions based on its title and subtitle. Unfortunately, even the terms "soldier" and "military leader" in the title are vague and open to interpretation. What Fritz does well, he does very well, but the limitations of *First Soldier* cannot be ignored.

The book is based on roughly a 50-50 combination of primary and secondary sources. Fritz does an excellent job of weaving together the best secondary source material with diaries, letters to wives, Nuremburg Trials testimony, wartime pronouncements and speeches, and documents from edited volumes. He then does an equally outstanding job of adding his own analysis and reading of events to create a new and refreshing understanding of many key episodes in the European theater of operations (ETO). Long-time students of the ETO will gain much from his well-reasoned and well-written effort.

First Soldier is organized chronologically but begins with some thematic background information. The first chapter, "Clausewitz, Hitler, and Absolute War," introduces a side of the führer seldom seen. Fritz makes the case that Adolf Hitler was well read on the Prussian Carl von Clausewitz and had given much thought to the wars of Frederick the Great, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, and Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff. "Emergence of the Idea," the second chapter, investigates Hitler's Great War experiences and his early 1920s development, including his composition of *Mein Kampf.* While most would agree that the führer had many intelligent qualities, we would probably not call him an intellectual. Fritz tries to leap this second hurdle, but here his logic begins to show cracks. He writes that "Hitler would endlessly quote Clausewitz to his generals" without offering proof (p. 17). He also writes "Whether Hitler ever read this passage [from Clausewitz] is unclear," "Although there is some

controversy over just how much [Karl] Haushofer's ideas influenced Hitler," and other qualified and speculative comments a bit too often for me (pp. 24, 29). Fritz nevertheless describes Hitler's philosophy as "a jumble of ideas," much closer to the conventional wisdom (p. 26).

Fritz begins the chronological portion with chapter 3, "War in Peace," a discussion of Hitler's remilitarization and international rules breaking phase from 1933 to 1939. Included are useful elaborations on a number of well-known interwar episodes: purge of the SA (Sturmabteilung, or "Storm Detachment" paramilitaries), the Blomberg/Fritsch/OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, or High Command of the Armed Forces, replacing the Reich War Ministry in 1938) affairs, and the Sudeten crisis. In his telling, Hitler was not merely lucky when the international community let him get away with announcing conscription and the creation of the Luftwaffe in 1935, remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, and the Anschluss plus Munich in 1938; he was smarter than German generals and diplomats. Fritz portrays the latter as hapless and clueless, while the führer had his finger on the pulse of the continent. With every success, however, there was a serious downside to Hitler's moves; his quickie Luftwaffe looked impressive in prewar newsreels but was too small and short ranged when tested in action. Likewise Germany's rearmament only spurred Britain, France, and the USSR (and eventually the United States) to match, then beat, the efforts of the Third Reich. Fritz also shows Hitler's generally poor job of choosing key subordinates, such as giving Hermann Göring responsibility to "manage" Germany's Four Year Plan.

First Soldier investigates and analyzes the first stages of World War II in chapters 4 and 5, "Blitzkrieg Unleashed" and "The Blitzkrieg Paradox." The stunning success of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Treaty gave way ten days later to declarations of war by Britain and France, a nasty and unanticipated shock to Hitler. Our main takeaway from the Polish campaign is the leading role of the army chief of staff, General Franz Halder. Halder soon becomes—and rightly—the book's chief villain, but during the summer and early autumn of 1939, he and the army were triumphantly efficient, while Hitler played "battlefield tourist" (p. 85). That all changes in chapter 5, during the western campaign, the key aspects of which Fritz expertly examines and scrutinizes. He rounds up the usual suspects of controversies and episodes: timing of the offensive and location of the *Schwerpunkt*, plus decisions to halt the panzers and allow the British to escape from Dunkirk. Fritz deals with these and other smaller examples forthrightly and by adept use of his sources. Neither does he shy away from making harsh judgments, such as dispelling speculation that Wehrmacht success at Dunkirk would have led to the same in Operation Sealion.

An unfortunate trend becomes noticeable at this point in Fritz's narrative: often credit for German successes is Hitler's alone, while blame for failures is spread around to the dictator, his generals, and the dysfunctional "system" at the top of the Third Reich. Further, the surrender at Compiegne initiates a new series of controversies and episodes: how to prosecute the air and sea war against the United Kingdom and execute their own cross-channel invasion, and later, on whether to prioritize the Mediterranean or USSR. Fritz handles these issues unevenly, most of which lay beyond the comfort zones of Hitler and the Wehrmacht. The problems posed by the spring 1940 defeat of the Second Anti-Hitler coalition caused at least as many problems as it solved, and these troubles were serious to the point of being existential. Like the dilemmas of the second half of the 1930s, where every German action prompted a reaction by adversaries and potential enemies, June 22, 1940, was not the end of the road but instead led to another, greater Pandora's box.

Fritz's handling of Operation Barbarossa and the first twenty-three months of the Nazi-Soviet

War form the heart of *First Soldier*. He hits his stride in chapters 6-9: "The Lure of Lebensraum," "Barbarossa: The Last Blitzkrieg," "Barbarossa: Catastrophe," and "A World Power or Nothing at All." As earlier, he knows his sources inside and out, skillfully weaves them into a coherent story, and does not shy away from hard truths or harsh judgments. Also as above, he tackles these issues in new ways by bringing fresh interpretations into play. Frankly, these are too numerous to recount here, but Fritz takes us through campaign planning, Kiev, Moscow, Operation Blau, Stalingrad, and "Tunisgrad" in north Africa, just to name the biggies. Even the most familiar readers will find new understanding of old decisions or situations expertly dealt with from the point of view of OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres, or High Command of the Army), OKW, army group, and, frequently, numbered field army commanders.

It is often difficult to maintain the same level of excellence throughout an entire book; the limitations of *First Soldier* begin to accumulate in "No Victory, No Peace" and "Never Again a November 1918," chapters 10 and 11. Occasionally Fritz maintains his earlier standards of analysis and scrutiny, for example, when investigating Operation Zitadelle, challenges of defensive planners facing D-Day landings, and events leading up to the Battle of the Bulge. However, he ignores issues of huge importance: the overthrow of Benito Mussolini and defection of Italy, the entire Italian campaign, withdrawal from greater Normandy to the German border, and the disastrous summer of 1944 in the East. And this partial list covers only fighting on land! Fritz largely ignores the massive battles of the Atlantic and Germany at sea and in the air, only mentioning them in a few sentences sprinkled throughout the book.

This revives the question of what goal Fritz had for *First Soldier*. He spends a lot of space relating Hitler's World War I *Frontkämpfer* frame of reference along with the führer's corresponding dislike and distrust of staff officers and generals; perhaps this is what Fritz (and Hitler) means by "soldier." Likewise, both Fritz and contemporary Germans describe Hitler as a *Feldherr*, usually rendered as warlord, but literally a field commander. Fritz holds Hitler to this low standard and so focuses mainly on the operational level and overwhelmingly on the land war in the East. Momentous strategic matters are ignored, Hitler's declaration of war against the United States, for example. Further, Fritz completely fails to discuss the Holocaust, or any links between Nazi aggressive expansionism and eliminationist murder, which must be seen as a major problem in any twenty-first-century history of the ETO.

So both in historical reality of the Third Reich at war and on the pages of *First Soldier*, real strategy enters into the discussion only infrequently. Despite invoking the name of Clausewitz in the first chapters and then occasionally thereafter, Fritz seldom establishes any link between the Prussian's theorizing and the dictator's actions. By the same token, Fritz shows amazement that Hitler was so poorly served by the very dysfunctional command and staff arrangement he created and oversaw! Hitler wanted an alternate to Ludwig Beck's relatively independent and obstreperous OKH so in 1938 created Wilhem Keitel's obsequious and pliant OKW. Then Fritz wonders how the führer could get good, useful advice and data in such a "system." Coupled with Hitler's well-known proclivity to operate off his self-described inspiration, genius, and intuition, while simultaneously failing to do any "homework," understand the wider world, and trust experts, these combinations were recipes for disaster.

In *First Soldier* we can see that Hitler might have been successful in the age of Frederick or Otto von Bismarck, where continental warfare consisted largely of fighting among neighbors in manageable packets. Like Kaiser Wilhelm II before him, however, he failed against dozens of enemies, globe-spanning empires, and continent-sized proto-superpowers. If this was not so serious

it would be comical; every one of Hitler's "cunning plans" failed as though cartoon character Wile E. Coyote had dreamt them up. In Fritz's telling no one in the Third Reich comes out looking good, neither Hitler nor pro- or anti-Nazi generals.

Fritz has crammed an impressive amount of information and insights on high-level Nazi command and control into fewer than four hundred pages of text. In the final analysis, he has written an excellent operational-level account of the first half of Hitler's war on Europe, in particular against the USSR. While this may have been the decisive sector of the ETO, I, for one, would have liked appropriate coverage of the fighting elsewhere in the theater, not to mention at sea and in the air. The same is true of the tremendous strategic issues that are ignored or given short shrift in *First Soldier*. Therefore, Fritz's Hitler is reduced to an über-army group commander: first among equals, granted, the one who could override, shout down, and cashier all the others. This then may answer my original questions about what Fritz means by führer as soldier: a corporal from the trenches prosecuting a world war with predictable results.