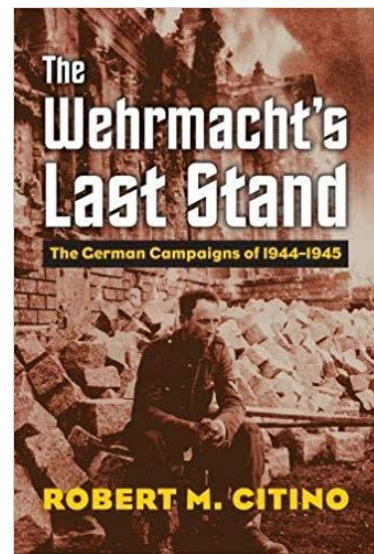


Robert CITINO: *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944-1945*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2017, 632 pp., ISBN: 978-0700624942.

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Tensions within the German Way of War

In the English-speaking world, Robert Citino has staked claim as the preeminent historian of the German operational approach to war. In 2005, he published *The German Way of War: From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* and this was soon followed by more focused examinations of the German war effort during the Second World War in *Death of the Wehrmacht: The German Campaigns of 1942* (2007) and *The Wehrmacht Retreats: Fighting a Lost War, 1943* (2012). In all three books, Citino examines what he terms the German way of war: an aggressive *Bewegungskrieg* (or war of movement) at the operational level based on surprise, audacity, and the initiative of local commanders designed to achieve a decisive victory in the shortest amount of time. In his most recent book, *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944-1945*, Citino extends his analysis of the army's operational approach to war during its years of utter defeat and ruin. While he demonstrates that elements of it still strove for at least a limited type of *Bewegungskrieg* in 1944 and 1945, he focuses on another strand of the Prusso-German army's military culture, one that proved increasingly important in the last years of the war. By placing the issue of German resilience in 1944/45 into the army's "long wartime history of holding on grimly and fighting against the odds" (p. 15), Citino makes a contribution to one of the fundamental disputes in the historiography of the Third Reich: why did the German army stay in the field so long after it was apparent that victory was no longer possible? In place of explanations centered on Hitler himself or the troops' ideological indoctrination, Citino offers an intriguing one that emphasizes long-standing traditions in the army.



His examination of the German army's performance, however, does not exist within a vacuum. In ten chapters evenly divided between the advances of the Western

Allies and the Soviet Union, Citino analyzes the various theaters of war, from the fighting between the Dnepr River and the Carpathian Mountains, Operation Bagration, and the final campaign culminating in the Battle for Berlin in the east, to the fighting in mountains of Italy, on the beaches of Normandy, and across the plains and forests of France and Belgium in the west. He follows conventional approaches to operational history by tracking the movement of armies, corps, and divisions, as well as providing brief character sketches of numerous commanders on both sides. Citino provides judicious evaluations of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the belligerents based on a solid grounding in the relevant secondary source literature, memoirs by the leading participants and, in the case of the Germans in particular, post-war military journals. The endnotes are themselves a contribution to the literature and offer a valuable starting point for research into the latter stages of the war. Similarly to the other volumes in this series, however, there is no use of the copious German army records held in both Freiburg, Germany and Washington D.C. While this means that there is nothing new uncovered within its pages, the book is intended for a popular audience and Citino's brisk and conversational prose ensure that it will appeal to a wide readership.

Citino provides several explanations for Germany's defeat in the war. First, the German army suffered from a material and manpower disadvantage that only worsened throughout the last two years of the conflict. No matter the theater, the Germans operated at a disadvantage. In Italy, Allied superiority in artillery, air power, and, most interestingly, naval gunnery meant that German attempts to drive the Anzio bridgehead back into the sea faltered in the face of Allied steel. As Citino notes, «once again, Allied firepower was the solution to German aggression» (p. 87). In his discussion of the D-Day invasion, Citino writes that «the victory went to sheer, raw power. The Allies had finally learned to transform their wealth and industrial superiority into combat power at the front» (p. 155). In the face of the largest amphibious invasion of the war up until that point, the Germans mustered a total of three divisions on the beaches, and only one of these units could be considered fit for front-line duty. In the east, German inferiority was much more pronounced. Perhaps nowhere was this disparity starker than in the center of the eastern front in June 1944. More than 1.25 million Red Army men supported by over 6,000 tanks and some 7,000 aircraft stood opposite around 850,000 German troops – though only 486,000 were combat ready – equipped with a mere 118 tanks and 61 fighter planes. By 1944, the German army faced numerical inferiority that at times reached absurd proportions. One aspect of this decline in German power that could be examined in more detail concerns the state of the German infantry by this stage of the war. While Citino is correct to emphasize the panzer divisions' importance in stitching up German lines, these units were a clear minority within the German order of battle in 1944 and a more focused

discussion of the German infantry's plight would be useful in getting at the army's increasingly lackluster performance.

Of course, the Germans had won many of their earlier victories against larger, better-equipped enemy forces. The conquest of France in 1940, the driving of British forces back across the Egyptian frontier in 1942, and the campaigns that, respectively, pushed to the gates of Moscow and to the western bank of the Volga in 1941 and 1942; all these were achieved against significant odds. So what had changed? Citino identifies two primary factors. First, the Allies had significantly improved their military performance. While problems still arose –such as the dismal Rapido River offensive and the faltering leadership of US VI Corps' commander General John Lucas at Anzio or the hasty and poorly coordinated Soviet assault on the Seelow Heights– the Germans no longer enjoyed a massive operational or tactical superiority by 1944. By mid-1944, Operation Cobra and the subsequent Battle of Falaise demonstrated that the U.S. Army could effectively pair its overwhelming firepower with mobility, while the Red Army had acquired the necessary experience, command and control networks, and material to finally carry out the consecutive operations fundamental to its pre-war doctrine.

The second factor was the evolving approach of the German army to the war. This was due in part to the previously mentioned shortages of men and weapons, but it also resulted from a clash between those who favored a mobile war and those who advocated a more unyielding approach. At times, the German army was able to resurrect the ghosts of *Bewegungskrieg* and inflict stinging defeats on its adversaries. Citino details Erich von Manstein's smashing of the Soviet 40th Army and the securing of the line in Uman area in late January 1944, as well as Walter Model's model encirclement battle outside of Warsaw in August 1944; here four German panzer divisions totaling 288 tanks and assault guns smashed the Soviet 2nd Tank Army, destroying some 550 of its 800 tanks. The concentration of panzer divisions required for such operations, however, left other sections of the front perilously reliant on over-matched infantry divisions and in the face of such material superiority, it was clear that these victories only gained the German army temporary breathing space.

Mobile operations also became increasingly suspect in the eyes of Hitler, who viewed them as a means for his commanders to justify their retreats. In the place of officers who advocated *Bewegungskrieg* –best epitomized by Manstein– a new breed of men assumed command of armies, army groups, and even theaters who personified the combative, determined fighters demanded by Hitler. Citino identifies officers such as Albert Kesselring in Italy, Ferdinand Schörner in the Soviet Union, and Model, who as Hitler's pre-eminent fireman, commanded armies and army groups in both France and the Soviet Union, as “standers”: men «who would follow orders to defend in place

rather than constantly begging for retreat» (p. 63). These officers presided over a shift in German practice as the army reverted to operations much more reminiscent of the First World War than 1940/41; as Citino notes, *Stellungskrieg*, or static warfare, became the norm for the German army during the last two years of war. While these commanders and this strategy could not win the war for Germany, they enacted a fearful toll in both Allied and Axis lives as they forced the Americans, British, and Soviet armies to push the Germans step-by-step back into the Reich.

The German army's devolution occurred in various ways. On the battlefield, the development of the *Feste Platz*, or fortress, strategy represented a clear repudiation of *Bewegungskrieg*. Hitler declared numerous cities fortresses which were to be held at all costs, ideally tying up Allied forces in long, drawn out battles. In reality, Allied spearheads simply bypassed the German forces bottled up in the cities, meaning they could play little to no role in the fighting. Within the officer corps as a whole, fanatical loyalty to Hitler replaced operational abilities as the defining characteristic of the German leadership. This was especially true following the 20 July assassination attempt, which implicated much of the army's officer corps in the eyes of the Nazi leadership, despite the fact that, as Citino notes, there were «far too few [...] great men» within the army's leadership who were prepared to take a moral stand against Hitler (p. 215). As a result of the subsequent investigation into the plot, the officer corps became increasingly politicized. Men like Schörner, whom Citino describes as «the most enthusiastic [...] of all the Führer's minions [...] a National Socialist if ever there was one» (p. 469), climbed the ranks, combining ideological commitment, terror directed at his own men, and a ruthless determination to stay in the field, ensuring that the war would continue until Germany ceased to exist.

Citino argues that while this loyalty to Hitler –from men as diverse as Schörner and Hans von Kluge– played a very important role in the army's willingness to fight to the very end, it complemented the much longer tradition of fighting against desperate odds that existed within the Prusso-German army. He places the German war effort into the historical context of the *Totenritt* or death ride: «an order that a commander obeyed no matter how dim the prospects for success or what it was going to cost him or his men. It existed in a realm beyond rational discourse or sober reflection» (pp. 10-11). It was this imperative to fight no matter the cost that motivated the army in 1944/45. Increasingly motivated by the nebulous concepts of will and belief –two ideas that fit neatly into the larger context of National Socialist ideology– the German officer corps kept the army in the field despite all chances of victory having long ago evaporated.

Citino also acknowledges the army's complicity in crimes committed against civilians, particularly in the occupied Soviet Union, though further analysis of this

issue would be interesting to see how the army's approach to occupation in the years of defeat evolved under the leadership of the "standers". Of course, this was not the primary goal of the book and Citino has succeeded admirably in reaching his objective. Highlighting the tensions inherent within the German army, he persuasively shows that the army itself generated the necessary impulses to fight the war to the very end, destroying itself and its country in the process. By placing the army's conduct in 1944/45 into the larger continuum of the army's approach to warfare, Citino has both made a real contribution to the historiography and provided a fitting capstone to his study of the German way of war.